DIRECTIONS

Malta & Gozo

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VISIT…

Malta & Gozo

DIRECTIONS

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Introduction to

Malta

▲ Xwejni Bay

With its sunny climate, sparkling waters and clutch of sandy beaches, as well as lively bars and plentiful restaurants offering top-notch modern Mediterranean food, the Maltese islands are generally thought of as a classic resort destination. But there's a lot more than just sun and sea on offer here – the chequered history of Malta, Gozo and Comino has left a huge number of historical sights, several of which have been justly awarded the status of World Heritage Sites.

The majority of these sights are concentrated in Valletta and the "Three Cities", laid out around the Grand Harbour and girdled by immense fortifications. Many of the impressive churches and palaces within are characterized by their ornate Baroque architecture, which came courtesy of a grand makeover spearheaded by the Knights of Malta in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There's also plenty of opportunity to get to grips with Malta's

When to visit

Most people visit during the high season (May–Oct); in July and August, when the Maltese take their holidays too, things get pretty hectic. It's searingly hot, and the beaches are extremely crowded, but it's a lively time to visit, coinciding with the annual village *festas*. Rain is rare between May and September, and the countryside is parched and dry. Things get quieter in the low season (Oct–May): many hotels and guesthouses slash their prices and the tourist crowds disappear. The weather is mild (you'll usually be able to pick up a tan), rainfall occasional, and the countryside beautifully green, but the islands can feel somewhat melancholy, and the sea is far too cold for swimming. Outside of the high season, the best times to visit are the autumn or spring shoulder seasons. Sea swimming is pleasant up to December, while in the spring, the countryside is ablaze with wild flowers.

▲ Catholic icons

◀ Azure window, Dwejra

military past, with a host of impenetrable forts and several museums dedicated to the islands' crucial role during World War II. Though the extravagant designs of the Knights are ever-present, the Neolithic era made an equally significant mark on the islands. The magnificent temples scattered over Malta and Gozo – the oldest man-made freestanding structures in the world – are second to none, and there are more major complexes here than in the whole of the rest of Europe.

Bilingual Malta

Malta is a truly bilingual country, with Maltese and English used interchangeably. Traffic signs, shop names and menus are usually in English; town and street names can be either English or Maltese. We've followed suit throughout this guide, using whatever you'll see on the ground.

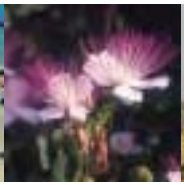
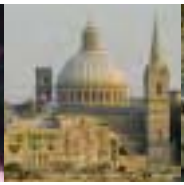
A short boat-ride from Malta, Gozo basks in a more rural character, going to sleep early and waking up with the roosters. And although it lacks the cultural sophistication and historical sights of the mainland, it's cleaner, quieter and less developed. The hilly topography and ravishing coastal cliffs offer some marvellous walks, while the dive sites offshore are widely acknowledged as some of the best in the Mediterranean.

▲ Lija

▲ Catholic feast

Malta

AT A GLANCE

▲ Valletta skyline

Valletta

The churches, convents, palaces and grand public buildings of Malta's capital, designated a World Heritage Site in its entirety, have remained largely unchanged since their construction more than 400 years ago. The addition of a clutch of national museums and art galleries, as well as Malta's best restaurants, make Valletta an eclectic place to explore.

Three Cities

Characterized by a medieval urban fabric of close-knit Baroque architecture, the "Three Cities" of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Copsicua offer bags of atmosphere, and hold several absorbing sights, from imposing Knightly palaces and forts to museums dedicated to modern militaria.

Mdina

Mdina emerged as Malta's first urban settlement under Phoenician rule, but it was the Arabs who rebuilt the fortifications extant today. The twisting alleys inside the citadel have kept vehicles and modernity at bay, and a ramble through this quiet area gives plenty of insight into the architectural whims of Malta's many rulers.

▼ Collachio, Vittoriosa

▲ Mdina

▲ Mellieħa Bay

Western Malta

With several sandy beaches and clear azure waters, many of them offering watersports equipment for rent, western Malta is ideal for a day by the sea. Development has been relatively restrained here, and landscape remains pleasantly natural. And if you're here in winter, the beaches beckon for bracing walks by the sea.

Gozo

With self-contained towns clustered around gigantic parish churches, and a population whose hospitality is legendary, Gozo offers a peaceful, pastoral alternative to Malta – and some stunning beaches and coastal landscapes, too.

▲ Mgarr Harbour

Comino

The tiny islet of Comino boasts a couple of lovely places to swim, including the clear turquoise waters of the Blue Lagoon, as well as some scenic coastal walks. The best time to visit is in the spring, when the rocky garigue habitat comes spectacularly into bloom.

▲ Capers in bloom

Ideas

The big six

Malta and Gozo's top sights are mostly the legacy of the islands' two "golden ages" – the Neolithic era, when the temple-building inhabitants were some of the most artistically advanced of their time; and the epoch of the Knights of Malta, who left an indelible mark via their immense fortifications and extravagant Baroque buildings.

▲ Vittoriosa

The placid Dockyard Creek forms a perfect foreground for Vittoriosa's triumphalist Baroque architecture.

P.66 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▲ St John's Co-Cathedral

The former conventual church of the Knights of Malta is thick with their commemorative monuments.

P.56 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ St Paul's Cathedral

A grand architectural set-piece and the masterpiece of Malta's most famous architect, Lorenzo Gafa.

P.87 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▲ Grand Master's Palace

Malta's seat of rule for more than 400 years, and a lasting testament to the wealthy Knights of Malta.

P.57 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▶ Hypogeum

With three underground levels bored into the rock by hand, the Hypogeum is one of the most fantastic monuments of the ancient world.

P.122 ▸ TARXIEN AND AROUND

▼ The Citadel, Rabat

The fortified citadel that towers over Rabat retains a fantastic medieval fabric, and is home to Gozo's best museums.

P.134 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

14

Churches

With about 350 churches – around one for every thousand inhabitants – Malta's distinction as the most devoutly Catholic country in the world is highly visible: each town is dominated by its grand Catholic church, many of which were built in the seventeenth century during nationwide drive to rebuild churches into ornate Baroque edifices. Piercing the skyline islandwide, the spires and domes of these churches serve as a characteristic part of any Maltese view.

▲ Gozo Cathedral

The highlight of the interior here is the trompe l'oeil ceiling painting.

P.135 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

▼ St Paul's Church

Dedicated to the saint who was shipwrecked in Malta, and with a couple of somewhat grisly associated relics.

P.57 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ Xewkija Parish Church

One of Europe's largest churches, visible from most of Gozo and dwarfing the town of Xewkija.

P.137 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

▼ St John's Co-Cathedral

Italian artist Mattia Preti's intricate sculptures fill every crevice of the Co-Cathedral's interior.

P.56 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ Ta' Pinu Basilica

Set in open countryside, the Ta' Pinu is an arresting sight.

P.148 ▸ WESTERN GOZO

Fortress Malta

Malta's strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean made it a valuable stepping stone, and the various regional powers that have occupied the island over the last 2000 years have turned it into a veritable citadel state. The most impressive defences are the great fortifications erected by the Knights.

▼ Fort St Angelo

Malta's most famous fort has faithfully guarded the Grand Harbour since 1200 AD.

P.70 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▼ Valletta's fortifications

Studded with sentry posts, the fortifications that girdle Valletta are undeniably impressive.

P.51 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▲ 1000-ton gun, Fort Rinella

Installed to defend the sea routes into the Grand Harbour, this is the largest gun ever made.

P.72 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▶ St Mary's Tower

Malta's largest coastal tower, built here to protect vessels crossing between Malta and Gozo against pirate attacks.

P.153 ▸ COMINO

▼ Victoria Lines

Built by the British in the 1870s, this defensive wall effectively cuts Malta in half.

P.76 ▸ SLIEMA AND ST JULIAN'S

Festivals

Most Maltese festivals are tied to, and arise from, the country's intense Catholicism. The majority are held in the summer when the Maltese work less and go out more, and they culminate in the grand town feasts, which are colourful and passionate events. The off-season is quieter, but not without its highlights: Carnival in February, and the Good Friday re-enactments in April, are both worth checking out.

▼ Historic Cities Festival

Traditional folk dances are just one of the various re-enactments staged during this week-long event.

P.165 ▸ ESSENTIALS

▼ Carnival

Competitions for the best floats ensure a large and colourful annual parade.

P.164 ▸ ESSENTIALS

▲ Jazz Festival

Renowned international performers take to the stage in a majestic setting at the foot of Valletta's fortifications.

P.164 ▸ ESSENTIALS

▼ Catholic feasts

Brass bands are a central feature of the islands' Catholic feasts.

P.163 ▸ ESSENTIALS

▸ Good Friday procession

Good Friday sees hooded penitence bearers parade through the streets.

P.164 ▸ ESSENTIALS

Beaches

Although the islands have relatively few sandy beaches (particularly in terms of the number of people who flock to them during the summer), quality makes up for quantity, with gorgeous swathes of sand set in gloriously natural landscapes – and you can beat the crowds by swimming in the mornings. If you're happy to forego sand, you'll find innumerable scenic bays and gorges cut into the rocky coastline which offer clear, inviting waters.

▼ Għajn Tuffieħa

Fantastic cliffs, amber sands and clear water make this one of Malta's most attractive beaches.

P.120 ▸ MĠARR AND THE SOUTHWEST COAST

▼ Blue Lagoon

This sweep of clear azure water is best enjoyed in the mornings, before the invasion of touring boats.

P.153 ▸ COMINO

▲ San Blas Bay

This small sandy beach remains gloriously untouched, fringed by bamboo and tamarisk trees and backed by citrus groves.

P.145 ▸ NORTHEAST GOZO

◀ Ramla Bay

One of the Mediterranean's most scenic beaches, great for a winter stroll or a summer swim.

P.144 ▸ NORTHEAST GOZO

▼ Island Bay

The chalky cliffs and deep-blue water make a beautiful scenic contrast here.

P.132 ▸ MARSAXLOKK AND AROUND

Knights' Malta

The Knights that ruled Malta for over 350 years were volunteer Christian crusaders who hailed from the cream of Europe's aristocracy. Each knight's family had to bequeath two-thirds of their annual income to the organization, while the assets of individual knights were inherited by the brotherhood upon their death – which made Malta's Knights fabulously wealthy. Their lifestyles were hugely extravagant, and their military might legendary.

▲ The Armoury

The impressive range of military hardware amassed by the Knights is displayed at the Armoury.

P.57 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▶ Auberge de Castille

The Knights' largest inn of residence, and Malta's grandest secular Baroque building.

P.51 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▲ Museum of Fine Arts

The elaborate rank insignias and medals displayed here illustrate the Knights' penchant for pomp and ceremony.

P.53 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ Maritime Museum

The Knights' military might is explained in numerous exhibits here.

P.70 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▼ Grand Master's Palace

The Knights' grand military victory is retold via these beautiful frescoes depicting episodes of the Great Siege of 1565.

P.57 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

Restaurants

Taking culinary influence from French and Italian cuisines, Malta's restaurants are best known for fish dishes, which tend to be deliberately simple so as to allow the fresh flavours to come through. Increasingly, the best restaurants also offer creative, constantly evolving Mediterranean fusion cuisine, using classic Maltese ingredients such as rabbit or octopus to prepare some original and delightful concoctions.

▲ Malata

Memorable French cuisine served up in an enviable spot in front of the Grand Master's Palace.

P.64 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ It-Tmun

Gozo's best option for fusion food, with a menu that changes weekly and an impressive wine list.

P.140 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

▲ Grabiel

Seafood specialist offering inventive preparations of the catch of the day.

P.132 ▸ MARSAXLOKK AND AROUND

◂ Giannini

The fusion dishes cooked up here are the most creative in Malta.

P.64 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▲ Rubino

Rubino's ever-changing menu of seasonal dishes has defined modern Maltese cuisine.

P.65 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ Terrazza

Great Mediterranean food served on a terrace that affords lovely views of romantic Spinola Bay.

P.82 ▸ SLIEMA AND ST JULIAN'S

Neolithic Malta

With the most extensive concentration of Neolithic temples in the world, five of which are designated World Heritage Sites, Malta and Gozo's Neolithic remains are unparalleled, and constitute the oldest free-standing man-made structures anywhere on the globe. The islands are also the source of the world's largest and most artistically accomplished cache of Neolithic sculptures known as "fat ladies".

▼ "Fat lady" statues

These beautiful figures serve as an eloquent reminder of the artistic achievements of Malta's Neolithic peoples.

P.54 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ Clapham Junction cart ruts

These deep channels are one of Malta's most intractable archeological mysteries.

P.96 ▸ RABAT AND THE CENTRAL SOUTH COAST

▲ Ggantija Temple

Despite being built some 5600 years ago, the temple complex here remains surprisingly intact.

P.143 ▸ NORTHEAST GOZO

◀ Mnajdra Temple

Set on round stones, the many altars at Mnajdra are unique to this temple.

P.127 ▸ HAĠAR QIM, MNAJDRA AND AROUND

▼ Ħaġar Qim

The heavy trilithon entrance here is one of the temple's most elegant features.

P.127 ▸ HAĠAR QIM, MNAJDRA AND AROUND

Architecture

Although Malta's various foreign rulers have left some glorious edifices, the islands' location has been the chief influence on their architecture. Ornate, Italian-style Baroque dominates, and is nicely expressed in many beautiful stone balconies. Styles intermingle in other cases, especially in the Siculo-Norman architecture, equally influenced by Sicilian peasant houses and Norman touches.

▲ Inquisitor's Palace

The courtyard here boasts a rare example of a Rhodesian Gothic cross-ribbed ceiling.

P.67 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▲ Valletta balconies

Enclosed timber balconies grace many old houses in Malta, but are ubiquitous in Valletta.

P.51 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▸ Għarb old town

The fantastic stone balconies here, many of which incorporate Catholic motifs, provide a quaint taste of rural Baroque.

P.149 ▸ WESTERN GOZO

▲ San Dimitri Chapel

Atmospherically located on Gozo's western cliffs, this is one of the islands' most beautiful rural chapels.

P.150 ▸ WESTERN GOZO

▼ Manoel Theatre

Malta's national theatre is notable for its intricate Baroque interior.

P.60 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

World War II Malta

Despite being the most heavily bombed country during World War II, Malta's civilian casualties were kept relatively low due to an extensive system of underground bunkers that housed the entire population. Nonetheless, food shortages brought the islands to the brink of surrender, but the nation's perseverance was eventually rewarded when Malta was decorated with the George Cross, Britain's highest award for acts of gallantry – the only time it has been awarded to a whole nation.

▲ Valletta Bell Memorial

The tolling of this huge bell commemorates the 7000 people who died in Malta during the war.

P.58 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ Floriana War Memorial

This striking and unusual statue commemorates Britain's Royal Air Force war casualties.

P.60 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▶ Unexploded bomb, Mosta Church

This lucky escape serves as a positive memory of the war years, and has entered local Catholic mythology.

P.100 ▸ CENTRAL MALTA

▲ Lascaris War Rooms

This absorbing museum includes an exhibition on the invasion of Sicily, which was engineered and launched from Malta.

P.52 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

◀ Air Raid shelter, Malta at War museum

These underground shelters provide a sobering insight into the hardships endured by those that lived in them.

P.66 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▼ War Museum

The exhibits here provide absorbing background on Malta during the war years.

P.58 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

Dead Malta

For Malta's devoutly religious population, from the Neolithic peoples to contemporary Catholics, death is regarded as the harbinger of eternal glory following a life of sacrifice. Passing on is a celebratory occasion here, as evidenced by the lavishly opulent tombs of the islands' cemeteries – the wealthy are often buried in mini-shrines.

▲ Tombstones, St John's Co-Cathedral

Death, triumph and glory set in inlaid marble.

P.56 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▲ Caravaggio's Beheading of St John the Baptist

Considered one of the premier canvases of the seventeenth- century, Caravaggio's masterpiece is breathtaking.

P.56 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▲ Archeological Museum

The exhibits here give an interesting insight into burial traditions over the centuries.

P.135 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

◂ Addalorata Cemetery

Malta's largest cemetery offers a fascinating look into local attitudes to death.

P.125 ▸ TARXIEN AND AROUND

▼ Mdina Dungeons

The gory tableaux here depict torture in Malta throughout the ages.

P.87 ▸ MDINA

Walks

If you stray from the nearest car park or settlement for a short stroll, you'll find that the Maltese islands' offer some truly spectacular vistas, whether over the rugged undeveloped interior or the scenic coastline. The serrated clay slopes and cliffs of the southern coasts offer the most dramatic walking territory in Malta, whilst Gozo boasts a gorgeous landscape of table-top hills, as well as the unusual backdrop of its saltpans.

▼ Il-Buskett

With its gnarled pines and towering oaks, Malta's only mature woodland makes for a nice stroll.

P.96 ▸ RABAT AND THE CENTRAL SOUTH COAST

▼ Ras Il-Qammieġħ

The rugged garigue landscape along the coastal cliffs is best appreciated on foot.

P.116 ▸ MELLIEHA AND THE NORTHWEST COAST

▲ Il-Kunċizzjoni

One of Malta's highest and least inhabited regions, offering fine views over western Malta and some lovely hikes.

P.97 ▸ RABAT AND THE CENTRAL SOUTH COAST

▼ Ġordan Hill

A country ramble in Gozo's western hills is highly rewarding, especially in winter when the landscape is green.

P.149 ▸ WESTERN GOZO

▶ Xwejni saltpans

Take a walk among the wonderfully abstract patterns of Gozo's saltpans.

P.141 ▸ NORTH-EAST GOZO

Maltese food

There are few true Maltese dishes, as many of the classic offerings are actually variations of recipes that originated elsewhere – the traditional preparations of rabbit take influence from France, while *pastizzi* hail from the Middle East. However, the Maltese incarnation of Mediterranean dishes has produced some unique concoctions.

▲ Gozitan antipasti

Featuring locally made sausages and cheeses, Gozitan antipasti is unmissable.

P.139 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

▲ Ftira

Cooked in a wood-fired oven, these traditional Gozitan pizzas are a real treat.

P.147 ▸ NORTHEAST GOZO

▲ Pastizzi

Hugely popular very tasty, *pastizzi* are a great tea-time snack.

P.91 ▸ RABAT AND THE CENTRAL SOUTH COAST

◀ Fresh bread

Dense and crunchy, Malta's bread is excellent and addictive.

P.80 ▸ SLIEMA AND ST JULIAN'S

▼ Rabbit

Charlie's Inn is the best place to enjoy rabbit cooked in traditional Maltese style.

P.109 ▸ BUĠIBBA AND ST PAUL'S BAY

Views

In these lands of hills and cliffs, innumerable birds-eye viewpoints reveal the features and compositional patterns of the towns, which expand in concentric circles from central squares with their Catholic churches. Countryside views show the rural landscape of fields interspersed with natural habitats formed over millennia of human use, as well as more wild and rugged rocky plateaux and cliffs.

▲ Ras Il-Wardija

Gozo's sheer western seacliffs are among the most scenic landscapes in the islands.

P.151 ▸ WESTERN GOZO

▶ Citadel, Rabat

The view from Gozo's second highest point provides a birds-eye view of local town planning, and is best enjoyed at sunset.

P.134 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

▼ Mdina's ramparts

The ramparts here offer an eye-stretching view that takes in inland Malta and the Mosta Dome.

P.90 ▸ MDINA

▲ Grand Harbour

The medieval cityscape that surrounds the harbour water is best appreciated from Valletta's fortifications.

P.52 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▼ Sliema

Tumbling down the hillside and lapped by yacht-filled waters, Sliema asserts the picturesque side of Malta's modern development.

P.53 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

Bars and cafés

The clement Maltese climate ensures that outdoor cafés flourish throughout the islands, many of them atmospherically situated within historic towns. There's plenty of variety, too, with sophisticated wine bars or modern drinking holes offering music and entertainment, as well as steamy colonial-era corner cafés and traditional town-square places that are often attached to local community groups such as bands and clubs.

▲ Il-Gattopardo

Spread over several rooms and courtyards of an atmospheric Mdina house, this is a soothing spot for a drink.

P.91 ▸ MDINA

▲ Misfits

Malta's original DJ bar and still its best, with a fantastic range of music.

P.84 ▸ SLIEMA AND ST JULIAN'S

▲ Simon's Pub

The combination of delicious, inexpensive cocktails and drinks and friendly staff is a real winner.

P.85 ▸ SLIEMA AND ST JULIAN'S

◀ Il-Forn Wine Bar

A lovely setting in a converted Baroque townhouse, this is a great option for a sociable drink.

P.73 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▼ Café Jubilee

Warm ambience, tasteful music and good snacks make this a Valletta favourite.

P.63 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

Seaside Malta

The Maltese islands have long had an affinity with the sea, and today there are plenty of ways to get close to the water. The many bars and restaurants built close to the sea provide a lovely setting for a meal or a drink, while the numerous promenades that are the focus of coastal towns offer a great vantage point to watch the comings and goings of the colourful local fishing boat, or join the locals for an evening stroll by the sea.

▼ Grand Harbour boat trip

A trip aboard one of Malta's vernacular boats offers a lovely perspective of the fortified medieval towns that ring the Grand Harbour.

P.66 ▸ THE THREE CITIES

▼ Passiġġata

Join the locals in a slow evening stroll by the sea.

P.74 ▸ SLIEMA AND ST JULIAN'S

▲ Spinola Bay

With a host of restaurants fringing the bay, this is a great spot for a romantic waterside dinner.

P.75 ▸ SLIEMA AND ST JULIAN'S

▼ Marsalforn promenade

Offering open views over the water, Marsalforn's promenade cafés are a great place to relax.

P.141 ▸ NORTHEAST GOZO

◀ Marsaxlokk

Filled with colourful Baroque boats, the harbour here is a beautiful sight.

P.130 ▸ MARSAXLOKK AND AROUND

Wildlife

At first glance, you might think Malta's rocky landscape harbours little in the way of fauna and flora, but despite the onslaught of development, the islands are surprisingly rich in species, many of them endemic. Additionally, Malta's position in the middle of the Mediterranean makes it a convenient stopoff for migrating birds, while the islands' waters harbour some of the richest marine life in the region.

▼ Marine life

Colourful soft coral, clear water and fantastic underwater formations make Malta one of the top scuba diving spots in the Mediterranean.

P.165 ▸ ESSENTIALS

▲ Garigue in bloom

This rocky habitat is at its most alluring in June, when flowing wild thyme colours the landscape light purple.

P.116 ▸ MELLIEHA AND THE NORTHWEST COAST

◀ Blue rock thrush

Malta's national bird lives and nests in cliff crevices, and can be spotted sitting on rocky outcrops.

P.154 ▸ COMINO

▲ Chameleon, Għadira Wetland

One of the best spots in the islands to see these fascinating creatures up close.

P.115 ▸ MELLIEHA AND THE NORTHWEST COAST

▼ Rock centaury

You'll spot Malta's national plant clinging to the edges of the islands' cliffs.

P.137 ▸ GOZO: RABAT AND THE SOUTH COAST

Catholic Malta

The unconscionably adulatory symbols of Catholicism are ubiquitous in Malta, a country where faith is constantly reaffirmed. Niches decorate countless walls, while the churches are resplendent with devotional artworks. Of the plethora of grand outdoor celebrations that commemorate biblical events and popular saints, Holy Week and the yearly round of town feasts see worshippers reach an almost hysteric level of passion.

▼ Church interiors

Church interiors are bedecked with silverware, chandeliers, and damask during the summer feasts.

P.163 ▸ ESSENTIALS

▼ Catholic niches

Street-corner niches are a ubiquitous feature of Valletta.

P.51 ▸ VALLETTA AND FLORIANA

▲ Feast fireworks

The displays staged during the feasts feature some of the best and most unique pyrotechnic set pieces in the world.

P.163 ▸ ESSENTIALS

▶ Stations of the Cross, Ta' Pinu

Ranged up a hillside, these life-size statues make an arresting sight.

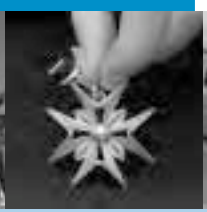
P.149 ▸ WESTERN GOZO

◀ Byzantine frescoes in St Agatha's Catacombs

These unusual frescoes are loaded with metaphor.

P.93 ▸ RABAT AND THE CENTRAL SOUTH COAST

Places



Valletta and Floriana

A tight grid of narrow streets clustered behind grand fortifications, and surrounded on three sides by the sea, Malta's impenetrable Baroque capital was built by the Knights of Malta after they vanquished the Ottoman invasion in the Great Siege of 1565. Now designated a World Heritage City, Valletta holds some of Malta's premier sights, as well as the island's best restaurants and largest concentration of shops, and is an attractive and atmospheric place for a couple of days' meanderings, taking in the mighty cathedral, a clutch of museums and the impressive fortifications. Now overwhelmed by its illustrious neighbour, Floriana holds little of interest other than its impressive tiered fortifications.

Auberge de Castille

Pjazza Kastilja, Valletta. Dominating the lofty, traffic-swamped square that marks Valletta's highest point, the Auberge de Castille is the largest and most impressive of Valletta's four surviving auberges, a monumental secular Baroque building that stands as a reminder of the superiority of the Knights of Castille, one of the brotherhood's largest chapters. The building was designed in the 1570s by Ġirolmu Cassar in the austere style the Knights then preferred, but was rebuilt in grand Baroque during the eighteenth century. It now occupies a whole block, with elaborate shell ornamentation framing its continuous series of louvred windows; the large column-framed doorway is topped with a bust of Grand Master de Fonseca, who initiated the rebuilding. Fonseca's coat of arms is alongside that of the Langue, and is surrounded by a triumphant assembly of flags, swords, drums, and shells. The auberge now houses the prime minister's office, and isn't open to the public.

▼ MALTESE BUS AT VALLETTA STATION

Visiting Valletta and Floriana

All buses to and from Valletta call at the bus station outside the city walls. No services go into central Valletta – the city is small enough to see on foot; if you're driving, park in the multistorey near the bus station. From Sliema, there are commuter boats that make the five-minute journey from the Sliema ferries area to Il-Mandraġġ on the western flank of Valletta (daily: May–Sept 7.45am–6.15pm; Oct–April 8.15am–5.45pm; every 30min or hour, depending on the time of day).

Upper Barakka Gardens

Pjazza Kastilja, Valletta. Daily 7.30am–dusk. Free. Set high on Valletta's fortifications, this typical Mediterranean garden was created in 1661 by the Italian Knight Flaminio Balbiani as a retreat for the Knights; today, it's Valletta's leafiest public park, thick with palms, pines and flowerbeds, and dotted with monuments commemorating the great and the good. Providing a pleasant refuge from the bustle of the city, Upper Barakka is also well worth visiting for its panoramic view over the Grand Harbour, taking in the fantastic medieval townscape and the fortifications of the Three Cities (see p.66).

Lascaris War Rooms

Lascaris Bastion ☎21/234936. Mon–Fri 9.30am–4pm, Sat & Sun 9.30am–12.30pm. Lm1.75. Originally used by the Knights as living quarters for their slaves, this dank and mouldy underground complex gouged deep into the bedrock was converted into the British forces' Maltese centre of operations, and the headquarters of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, during World War II. Conditions were claustrophobic – a thousand people worked here, 240 at a time in six-hour shifts – but it was from Lascaris that the Allies changed the course of the war in the Mediterranean by severely disrupting the Axis supplies to North Africa, launching the invasion of Sicily, and eventually engineering Italy's surrender. An interesting museum now recreates the wartime atmosphere by means of wax dummies, maps, props and examples of weaponry such as the J-type Contact Mines that the Italians planted around Malta's seas. Each room is dedicated to an area of operation; the largest concentrates on Operation Husky, the 1943 Allied invasion of Sicily directed by General Dwight Eisenhower, where a large map of Sicily details the multi-pronged attack by air and sea.

St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity

Triq Papa Piju V, Valletta. ☎21/223200, ⓦwww.sjcav.org. Daily 10am–9.30pm. Free. Malta's national centre for modern arts occupies the historic surrounds of the St James Cavalier, an imposing pentagonal tower built in the 1570s to serve as a rearguard defence position in the event that the city's fortifications were breached. Within its thick walls are a series of half-barrel ammunition chambers connected to a ramp that leads to the roof, where heavy guns were formerly installed. The complex was converted into an arts centre in 1995 by

▼ UPPER BARAKKA GARDENS

▲ ST JAMES CAVALIER

Richard England, Malta's most famous contemporary architect, and with many of the original features left intact, it's worth visiting in its own right. The added allure is the eleven former ammunition chambers housing rotating exhibitions by Malta's most eminent artists – mostly paintings, but also photography, sculpture and etchings. Styles range from the impressionistic to the abstract and avant-garde; keep an eye out for the work of Gabriel Caruana, Austin Camilleri, Norbert Attard and Vince Briffa. On weekends between October and May, English-language plays and occasional musicals and dance events are staged in the theatre-in-the-round, while the small cinema shows two art-house films each evening all year round.

Hastings Gardens

Triq Papa Piju V, Valletta. Daily 7.30am–dusk. Free. This diminutive garden set behind Valletta's fortifications is dedicated to Lord Hastings, a former British governor (1824–1826) who died at sea in 1827 and is buried in the Neoclassical shrine at the centre of the garden. Small oaks, pines and sparse flowerbeds leave Hastings quite exposed, but its lofty viewpoints are reason enough to visit. You can see how the fortifications crease over each other to give 180-degree fire-range; beyond, there's Marsamxett Harbour with its yacht marinas, then Manoel Island and the conurbation of Sliema and St Julian's.

National Museum of Fine Arts

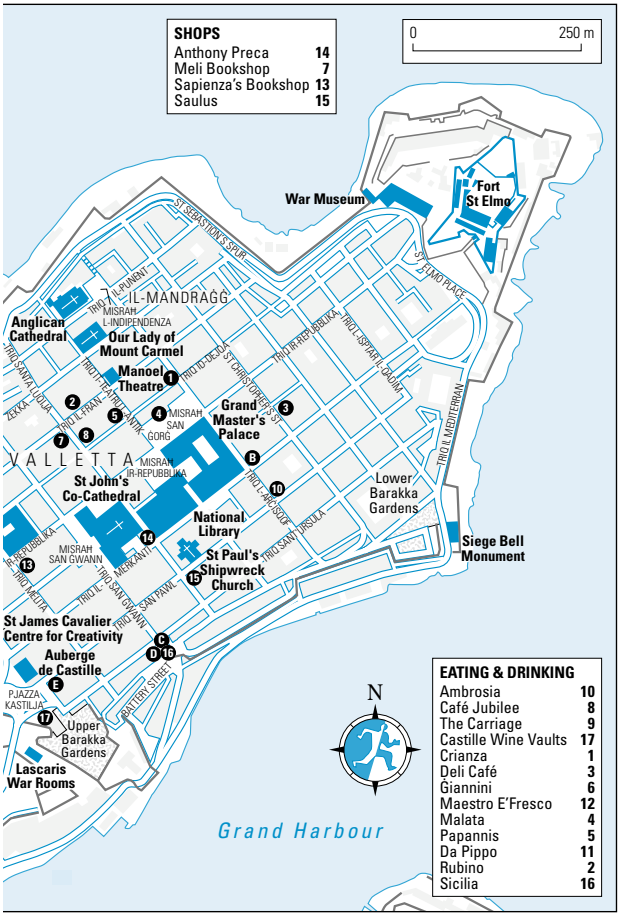
Triq Nofs In-Nhar, Valletta ☎21/225769, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm1.

Originally the home of a French knight, and later the residence of the naval chief commander under the British, this Baroque and Rococo palace now houses a fine collection of paintings, mostly by Malta-associated artists. The building's large rooms have been pared down over the centuries, and little remains of the original splendour suggested by the grand staircase and fanciful ceiling-friezes. Dating from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries, some of the works on show are particularly outstanding – look out for the various paintings by Mattia Preti, the Italian artist courted by the Knights, whose work features

in many Maltese churches, as well as solemn portraits of knights and other luminaries by the French Antoine de Favray, and dramatic depictions of monumental historical and religious events by the Maltese Ġiuseppi Cali. British artists are represented by Edward Lear's cluster of Maltese landscapes and townscapes, and Joseph Turner's rendition of the Grand Harbour during a storm, which captures the scene perfectly despite the fact that he never visited Malta.

National Museum of Archeology

Triq Ir-Repubblika, Valletta ⓣ21/221623, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm1. Built in 1575 to a design by Ġirolmu Cassar, the former Auberge



de Provence now houses the National Museum of Archeology, whose exhibits, dating from 5000 to 2500 BC, represent the legacy of the Neolithic era's most advanced nation. The collection is exhibited in a timeline progression, starting from a model of a rock-cut tomb of the Żebbuġ Phase and incised pottery and pendants of rodents' teeth from the Għar Dalam and Skorba Phases displayed in the first room. Things get more dramatic in the neighbouring Tarxien Hall, full of spiral motifs carved on stones removed from the Tarxien Temple and, more importantly, a hollowed altar in which animal bones and flint knives were found – the strongest evidence of animal sacrifices in Malta's temples. Concentrating on how the temples were

▲ SPIRAL CARVINGS, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ARCHEOLOGY

built, the Prehistoric Architecture room holds a stone model dating from the temple-building period itself, considered to be the first ever architectural design, and displaying some of the features that make Maltese temples such robust structures: the large corner megaliths that provided support, and the corbelling leading up to the primitive domed roofs. The Human Figure room holds stone phallic symbols and various human sculptures thought to have been made for ceremonial use, from well-endowed female nudes to sexless figures with pleated skirts and headdresses. Many are headless – the loop at the neck would have been used to attach different heads for each ceremony. The last has been reserved for the museum's star exhibit, the Sleeping Lady. This hand-sized figurine found in the Hypogeum depicts a large woman reclining on a couch, delicately carved in minute detail and charged with metaphoric atmosphere.

St John's Co-Cathedral

Triq Ir-Repubblika, Valletta ☎21/113456. Mon–Fri 9.30am–12.30pm & 1.30–4.15pm, Sat 9.30am–12.30pm. Lm1. Probably the most opulent Catholic church after the Vatican's St Peter's, the Co-Cathedral stands as the Knights' self-aggrandising shrine. It was designed by the prolific Ġirolmu Cassar in the 1570s to serve as their conventual church, and the austere facade, with its turret-like bell-towers, reflects their early battle sensibilities. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, however, the Knights set about transforming the plain interior into a blaze of Baroque art. Mattia Preti (1613–99) supervised the twenty-year project which cost, in some years, more than Malta's entire military budget. The artistic diversity of the Co-Cathedral was further enhanced when eight side chapels were individually assigned to each Langue, or Knightly regional grouping – each installed monuments to its regional Grand Masters and competed to create the most flamboyant decoration. There's further rich ornamentation to the right of the chancel in the chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Carafa, which is enclosed by silver balustrades and holds an elegant gilded icon of the Madonna. The floor of the nave is taken up with 364 inlaid marble tombs to influential knights: each features a Latin eulogy and epitaph framed by symbols of prestige and glory. The frothy leaf carvings on the nave's walls, as well as most of the altar paintings and the eighteen lurid vignettes on the vault depicting episodes from St John's life, are all the work of Mattia Pretti, whose simple tombstone lies to the left of the main entrance. The cathedral's Museum of St John starts at the Oratory of St John, which holds Caravaggio's magnificent Beheading of St John the Baptist; painted in 1608, it's considered to be his masterpiece, with perfectly balanced composition and virtuoso use

of light and shade. In amongst the silverware, vestments and portraits of various Knights, the museum's prized exhibits are the three huge and majestic Flemish tapestries, commissioned to hang in the cathedral's nave and dating from 1702.

Grand Master's Palace and the Armoury

Triq Il-Merkanti, Valletta ☎21/249349, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. An imposing two-storey building occupying an entire block, the Grand Master's Palace (daily 9am–5pm; closed occasionally when parliament is in morning session, and during official state visits. Lm2) has served as Malta's seat of government since it was built to a design by Ġirolmu Cassar in 1571. Originally the residence of the Grand Master, then of British governors, it now houses the president's office and Maltese parliament. Its high, bare walls stand testament to the siege mentality prevalent in Cassar's time, but the interior, awash with artistic treasures, provides a splash of colour. The five state rooms open to visitors are arranged around a U-shaped corridor, and are decorated throughout with geometric ceiling friezes, as well as the Grand Master's marble coats of arms inlaid into the floors and a series of lunettes depicting knightly naval battles and idealized Maltese scenes. All the rooms feature dramatic coffered and panelled timber ceilings with gilded pendants, massive crystal chandeliers, bold-coloured brocade fabrics, portraits of various Grand Masters and frescoes depicting key events of the Knights' history painted in 1576 by the Italian Matteo Perez D'Aleccio. Only the State Room displays the British influence, with royal portraits from George III to Elizabeth II. The Council Room, meanwhile, is adorned with copies of the fantastic Gobelin Tapestries, depicting romanticized scenes of New World animals and hunters encountered by the German Prince Johan Mauritz of Nassau during his expedition from 1636 to 1644. The impressive militaria in the Armoury (same hours; Lm2) is spread over two barrel-vaulted halls that were formerly used as the palace stables. The weaponry of deceased knights passed automatically into the Armoury, and by the time of their last inventory, the Knights had amassed 40,000 muskets and enough military hardware to equip an army of 18,000. Only a fraction of the haul remains, but the five thousand or so pieces comprise virtually the whole range of armaments produced between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries in Malta and other European countries; highlights include a German sword from 1550, which doubled as a pistol, and a selection of armour.

St Paul's Shipwreck Church

Triq San Pawl, Valletta ☎21/236013. May–Oct daily 6.30am–noon & 1pm–7pm; Nov–Apr daily 6.30am–7pm. Free. One of the capital's most

▼ TRIQ SAN PAWL

resonant churches – the present structure, consecrated in 1740, is the third incarnation on this site – St Paul's is dedicated to the shipwreck of Malta's favourite saint in 60AD (see p.105). Its most famous artefacts are a fragment of St Paul's wrist bone set in a gilded reliquary, and the pillar on which he was beheaded. Look out also for the large painting in the chancel by the Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, made in 1579 for the original church and depicting, in rather dark, solemn tones, the bishop kneeling in front of St Paul; and the strikingly triumphal statue of St Paul, in which the Maltese Melchiorre Gafa, who sculpted it aged 22 in 1658, portrays the saint as full of religious rage, with deep frown and angry eyes.

Siege Bell Monument

Triq Il-Mediterran, Valletta. Daily 9am–5pm. This huge bell, mounted on a specially built podium, was erected in 1992 and was jointly inaugurated by the then Maltese President Ċensu Tabone and Queen Elizabeth II to commemorate the anniversary of the George Cross Award to Malta (see p.59), and to honour the 7000 service members and civilians that died here during World War II. The bell tolls daily at noon, and its boom can be heard throughout Valletta – intended as a reminder of Malta's war victims.

Fort St Elmo

St Elmo Place ☎21/222430. St Elmo was built by the Knights over six months in 1552 to forestall imminent invasion by the Turks. Its elegant star shape was intended to provide a defence umbrella of crossfire, and the design was certainly robust – St Elmo withstood four weeks of cannon fire from three sides before being captured in the first thrust of the 1565 Great Siege. Later, when Valletta was built, the fort was incorporated within the city's fortifications, and during World War II it was hit by a bomb that caused the war's first six casualties. Today, St Elmo houses the Police Academy, and while the public aren't generally allowed inside, you can take in battlemented walls from the square outside the main gate. The doors do open once a month between October and June for colourful and exciting re-enactments of the Knights' military parades, with much ceremonial cannon and musket fire; for specific dates, check the Calendar of Events at ⓦwww.visitmalta.com.

▲ FORT ST ELMO

War Museum

St Sebastian's Spur, Fort St Elmo complex, Valletta ☎21/222430, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm1. This small, cluttered museum dedicated to Malta's role in World War II holds a range of interesting exhibits, from rank insignias and uniforms to all manner of guns and period photographs showing the ravages of aerial bombardments.

Highlights include an Italian U-boat, an explosive-packed suicide speedboat commandeered by the Allies during the invasion of Sicily, but the star exhibit is the aptly named Faith, the sole survivor of the three Gloucester Gladiator biplanes that performed so bravely in Malta's air defences in 1939. A copy of the 1942 George Cross award, given to Malta for its endurance during the intense aerial bombing campaign and blockade that pushed the island to the brink of surrender, is also prominently displayed.

Il-Mandraġġ

Occupying the northern corner of Valletta, the crumbling slum district of Il-Mandraġġ is demarcated on two sides by the sea, and on the other two by Triq It-Teatru L-Antik and Triq Id-Dejqa. Until the 1960s, the area's alleys were alive with the activity of blacksmiths and bakers, and, along Triq Id-Dejqa, a glut of sleazy bars (one or two of which survive), where prostitutes served British sailors. Squalid and overpopulated, Il-Mandraġġ was described in the 1930s by British writer Evelyn Waugh as "the most concentrated and intense slum in the world". Today, the crumbling stone buildings towering over dank alleys remain faithful to the original urban fabric of Valletta, and it's worth exploring a little to absorb the atmosphere of what's now a safe, if rather desolate, district. Triq Il-Punent cuts through the heart of Il-Mandraġġ, and opens into a small square where a monument commemorates the late-eighteenth-century cleric Mikiel Xerri, leader of a planned coup against the French occupation, who was caught before the plot was activated and publicly shot along with 34 other cohorts in Misraħ San Ġorġ in 1799. On the west side of the square is the prominently spired Anglican Cathedral of 1839, whose construction was paid for by Queen Adelaide (widow of King William IV) who, when convalescing in Malta, was shocked at the absence of an Anglican church.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church

Triq It-Teatru L-Antik, Il-Mandraġġ, Valletta. Daily 7am–9pm. Free.

Following its destruction in World War II, the rebuilding of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (the original dated from the 1570s) took twenty years and demonstrated a reassertion of the dominance of Baroque architecture in Malta. The resulting structure shows more concern with size than it does with artistic detail – the idea seems to have been to make Carmel's egg-shaped dome eclipse the spire of the nearby Anglican

▼ INDEPENDENCE MONUMENT

▲ TRIQ IR-REPUBBLIKA

Cathedral, but together, the two form a classic feature of Valletta's skyline. The interior is unusually bare by Maltese standards, but is worth a peek to take in the dizzying hollowness within.

Manoel Theatre

Triq It-Teatru L-Antik, Il-Mandraġġ, Valletta ☎21/246389, ⓦwww.teatrumanoel.com.mt. Guided tours Mon–Fri 10.30am, 11.30am & 5.15pm, Sat 11.30am & 12.50pm. Lm1.70.

Personally funded by Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena in 1731, Malta's national theatre is one of Europe's oldest. Wholly built from timber, the intimate six-hundred-seat oval-shaped interior is ringed by boxes, some finished in gold. Two reservoirs underground perfect the acoustics, which are so precise that orchestral conductors have to work from one side of the stage to prevent the rustle made by turning the pages of music sheets audible in the auditorium. Included in the entry price, the obligatory half-hour guided tours provide ample detail on the construction of the theatre and its history, but the Manoel is best appreciated during an evening performance (see p.168); it's also worth timing your visit to take in the free lunchtime concerts staged in the foyer (Oct–May Wed 12.30pm–1pm).

Floriana

Ringed by tiered fortifications, Floriana is a quiet little town that feels like a suburb of Valletta. Although its grid of residential homes hold little allure, it's worth taking a look at the monuments scattered around the district's massive town square, Pjazza San Publiju: a striking golden eagle atop a pillar, commemorating RAF victims of World War II, and the Independence Monument, an ecstatic hands-raised woman who seems to levitate with the symbolic euphoria of freedom. The undulating stones that pave the square are lids to the now-sealed granaries built by the Knights to store grain reserves.

Argotti and St Philip gardens

Triq Sarria, Floriana. Originally a private retreat of one of the Knights, Argotti Gardens (daily 7.30am–dusk; free) were converted into botanical gardens in 1805 – though this is a somewhat ambitious title for what remains a small and incomplete collection of exotic plants. The specimens are named in informative panels, and there's a lovely grotto whose interior is adorned by red coral, calcite crystals. The main draw here, however, is the impressive view of Floriana's fortifications. There's an even better perspective from the neighbouring St Philip Gardens (daily 7.30am–1pm; free). The profusion of citrus groves, climbing vines and bougainvillea here surround St Philip Ravelin, a triangular bastion that forms part of the Floriana Lines, and is now dominated by the

The Floriana Lines

In the 1630s, as the Turks expanded their fleet, the Knights feared an attack, and commissioned Pietro Paolo Floriani, engineer to the pope, to assess Malta's defences. Floriani proposed a line of fortifications across the neck of the Sciberras Peninsula – enclosing Valletta and in effect creating a new fortified suburb, Floriana – so that Malta's entire population could be crammed behind the defences in the event of an invasion. Critics pointed out that these Floriana Lines were too ambitious and too expensive, but work nonetheless began in 1635; by 1650 the fortifications were almost complete, and entirely girdled the new town of Floriana. In 1670, the defences were strengthened by means of the Floriana Hornwork, a horn-shaped bulwark jutting out from the Lines' southwest corner, with a fire-range extending across the inner creeks of the Grand Harbour. The Floriana Hornwork and Portes Des Bombes, the sole gate through the fortifications, were completed in 1716 and proved the ultimate deterrent: the Turks never attacked, principally because of the virtual impossibility of breaking through the impenetrable fortifications.

Wignacourt Fountain, a high Baroque affair built by the Knights. The fountain is the best spot from which to appreciate the views of the Floriana Lines, the tiered walls of ravelins, bastions, curtains and fortifications fanning north and south. To the south, you can glimpse the Portes Des Bombes, the pompous Baroque gate of three arched doors that still punctuates the main trunk road entering into Floriana and Valletta.

Hotels

British

40 Triq Il-Batterija, Valletta
☎21/224730, ⓦwww.britishhotel.com.
One of Malta's oldest hotels, though the interior and exterior are uninspiring. The en-suite rooms are basic with beautiful old tiles, pine furnishings and phone; those with balconies overlooking the Grand Harbour cost an extra Lm2 per night.

▼ PORTES DES BOMBES

Doubles from Lm20, breakfast included.

Castille

Pjazza Kastilja, Valletta ☎21/220173, ⓦwww.hotelcastillemalta.com. Mid-level Baroque place across the street from Auberge de Castille, offering carpeted, bright en-suite rooms with a/c, TV and telephone. *La Cave* restaurant, in a barrel-vaulted cellar, has good pizzas and wine. Doubles from Lm32, breakfast included.

Grand Harbour

47 Triq Il-Batterija, Valletta ☎21/246003, ⓦwww.grandharbourhotel.com. Budget base, with cramped corridors and staircases, and worn, mostly en-suite rooms. Rooms on the front have excellent views of the Grand Harbour. Doubles from Lm16, breakfast included.

Osborne

Triq Nofs In-Nhar, Valletta ☎21/243656, ⓔosbornehotel@vol.net.mt. The distinctly old-world atmosphere here adds to a certain intimacy. The 59 large but worn en-suite rooms have a/c, phone and TV – those on the rear upper floors have good views over Valletta. Doubles from Lm28, breakfast included.

▼ GOLD SHOP

Hostel

Dar Niki Cassar

178 Triq Il-Merkanti, Valletta ☎21/240680, ⓔymca@waldonet.net.mt. Malta's best–value hostel, set in a historic four-storey town-house with beautiful floor tiles, airy and cool six-bed dorms, a great view from the roof and friendly management. Facilities include Internet access, washing machines and large kitchen. Dorm beds Lm3, breakfast included.

Shops

Anthony Preca

157 Triq Santa Luċija, Valletta ☎21/221165. Mon–Fri 8.45am–12.30pm & 4–7pm, Sat 8.45am–12.30pm. The oldest and most reliable of the gold shops along this stretch, offering an exciting assortment of traditional designs, including Maltese crosses.

Meli Bookshop

185 Triq Il-Forn, Valletta ☎21/237266. Mon–Fri 9am–1pm & 4–7pm, Sat 9am–1pm. A good selection of English-language titles in all genres – reference, guide-books, novels and travel. Many are remaindered stock, and sell for half the published price, but there are new titles, too.

Sapienza's Bookshop

Triq Ir-Repubblika, Valletta ☎21/233621, ⓦwww.sapienzas.com. Mon–Sat 9am–7pm. Valletta's largest bookshop, with a

▲ PASTURI STATUETTES

good selection of Malta-related titles as well as reference, classics and fiction.

Saulus

282a Triq San Pawl, Valletta ☎79430027 (mobile). Mon–Fri 10.30am–12.30pm, 4.45–7pm; Sat 9.30am–12.30pm. A large range of Catholic icons and other religious artefacts, ranging from tiny chalices and crosses to metre-high china Madonnas. Look out for *pasturi* – finger-sized clay figurines depicting Maltese traditional characters in period dress that can make nice ornaments.

Cafés

Café Jubilee

125 Triq Santa Luċija, Valletta ☎21/252332. Daily 8am–1am; closed Aug. Cosy place serving great coffee, pasta dishes, large pastizzi and other snacks. Very busy and raucous during winter lunch-times, but quieter in summer when the Maltese vacate Valletta for the beaches. The flock-wall-papered walls are a kaleidoscope of curio prints, and the music is tasteful, ranging from world to classical music and ambient techno.

Restaurants

Ambrosia

137 Triq L-Arċisqof, Valletta ☎21/225923. Mon–Sat noon–2.30pm. Closed two weeks in Aug. Cooked up by one of Malta's most celebrated chefs and served in an informal room with warm auburn walls, the daily changing menu of pastas, salads, meats and fish includes favourites such as goats' cheese soufflé, tuna carpaccio, fettuccini with ricotta and rocket or chicken liver and fig salad, for Lm3–5 per dish.

The Carriage

22/5 Valletta Buildings, Triq Nofs In-Nhar, Valletta ☎21/247828. Mon–Fri noon–3.30pm, plus Fri & Sat 7.30–11.30pm. Closed two weeks in Aug. Neat, neutrally decorated place that attracts upscale business-people for lunch. The service is professional and the cooking creative – you might start with breaded aubergine stuffed with mozzarella, or spinach and mascarpone ravioli with basil and pine nuts; main courses include steamed grouper with oyster mushrooms and ginger, and roast quail stuffed with aubergines and sage. Main courses around Lm6.

▲ *THE CARRIAGE* RESTAURANT

and nutritionally balanced, the beautifully presented dishes (around Lm8) offer a new take on Maltese staples, and there's an equally original wine list. Service is quick and professional. Main courses are around Lm8.

Crianza

33 Triq L-Arċisqof, Valletta ☎21/238120. Mon–Sat noon–2.30pm & 6.30–10.30pm, Sun 6.30–10.30pm. Familiar and more original adaptations of pizza, pasta and salads, served in a pleasant cellar with a low barrel-vaulted stone ceiling and a splash of colour provided by yellow chequered tablecloths. Good value, with most pastas under Lm2, and pizzas at Lm2–3.

Deli Café

141 Messina Palace, St Christopher St, Valletta ☎21/244863. Mon–Sat 9.30am–6pm. Informal eatery in a covered courtyard serving up large portions of pasta from a daily-changing menu. Fillings for *ftira* rolls include the traditional tuna, olive oil, pickled vegetables and tomato paste. Service is instant, and prices a bargain – under Lm2 for pastas, and under Lm1 for *ftiras*.

Giannini

Triq Il-Mitħna, Valletta ☎21/237121. Mon–Sat noon–2.30pm & 7–10.30pm. This elegant townhouse with panoramic views over Manoel Island and Marsamxett Harbour may be impressive, but the food is even more outstanding: probably the most creative Mediterranean fusion dishes in Malta. Prepared with the freshest seasonal ingredients

Malata

Misrah San Ġorġ, Valletta ☎21/233967. Mon–Sat noon–3pm & 7–11pm. One of Malta's best French restaurants, with seating in an atmospheric cellar or at outdoor tables facing the Grand Master's Palace. Adventurous mains (around Lm6) include duck with foie gras and grapes, or frogs' legs in garlic butter and herbs. Fresh fish comes drizzled with piquant sauces, and meat dishes are excellent – try the rabbit with asparagus and light mustard sauce.

Papanni's

55 Triq Id-Dejqa, Valletta ☎21/251960. July–Sept Mon–Fri noon–2.30pm; Oct–June Mon–Fri noon–2.30pm, plus Fri & Sat 7–11pm. Italian-style trattoria set within the honey-coloured stone walls of a converted townhouse, offering standard antipasti, pastas, risotto, salads, grilled meats and fish at under Lm4 per dish.

Da Pippo

136 Triq Melita, Valletta ☎21/248029. Mon–Sat noon–3.30pm. Small, informal Italian-style trattoria that's good for quick lunches. Daily specials and Maltese staples include stuffed marrows, *bragioli* (steak stuffed with minced pork), and grilled fish with salad and roast potatoes. The handsome antipasto is on the house and includes local delicacies such

as *bigilla* (broad-bean dip) and *ġbejniet* (Gozitan cheese). About Lm5 for main courses.

Rubino

53 Triq Il-Fran, Valletta ☎21/224656. Mon–Fri 12.15–2.30pm, plus Tues and Fri 7.45–10.30pm. Closed Aug. Best place in the island for modestly priced but well-executed Maltese-based cuisine. The menu is changed every few days, and recurrent seasonal dishes include pasta with minced pork, white wine and bay leaves; tuna with balsamic vinegar, mint and green peppercorns; Maltese-style sautéed meat-balls; and the dessert Cassata Siciliana, a lovely Italian cake. Tuesday evenings are dedicated to rabbit cooked the traditional way, in garlic and white wine.

Sicilia

1A Triq San Ġwann, Valletta ☎21/240569. Mon–Sat noon–2.30pm. Popular, brisk and inexpensive lunch spot serving generous portions of Sicilian-style pasta, meat or fish dishes, plus a selection of Maltese snacks, including *ftira*. Seating is on an outdoor terrace with views of the Grand Harbour.

Bars

Castille Wine Vaults

Pjazza Kastilja, Valletta ☎21/237707. Daily 10.30am–1am. The largest of Malta's spate of new wine bars serves a large selection of wines and suitable accompaniments such as dips or antipasti. An attractive setting in barrel-vaulted cellars, it's busiest on winter weekends, when there's regular live music (mostly jazz).

Maestro E'Fresco

8 Triq Nofs In-Nhar, Valletta. ☎21/233801. Tues–Fri 6pm–1am, Sat–Sun 7pm–1am. Café-bar and live-music venue, where the sponge-painted yellow walls, teak furnishings and soft rock or world music in the background create an intimate yet informal atmosphere. It's popular amongst fashionable, cultured Maltese for an after-work snack and drink, and has regular soft rock or jazz bands (Thurs, Fri & Sat 9.30pm).

▼ MAESTRO E'FRESCO BAR

The Three Cities

Occupying two narrow peninsulas on the other side of the Grand Harbour from Valletta and enclosed on the land side by Malta's largest defensive fortification, the Three Cities of Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua retain a romantic, medieval urban fabric that makes them a pleasure to wander through, with a scattering of individual sights on which to focus your exploration. Malta's second-oldest town, atmospheric Vittoriosa (sometimes known by its old name, Birgu) has the highest concentration of things to see; both Senglea and Copsicua sustained heavy damage during World War II, and have less to recommend them; the latter, however, does boast an extraordinary network of fortifications. It's also worth travelling west of the Three Cities to see the gigantic cannon at Fort Rinella.

The Three Gates and Malta At War Museum

Triq Boffa, Vittoriosa. Until the Three Cities' fortifications were breached for vehicular access, the grandiose, three-tiered Three Gates provided the sole entrance to Vittoriosa. The first, the exuberantly Baroque Advanced Gate, was built in 1722, and opens into an elegantly restored courtyard from where a network of claustrophobic tunnels and small rooms were gouged into the bedrock to serve as the town's shelter during World War II. Now opened up as a museum (☎21/809617, ⓦwww.wirtartna.org; Mon–Sat 10am–4pm; Lm1.50) to that era, the tunnels hold a mildly

▼ MAIN GATE, VITTORIOSA

Visiting the Three Cities

Buses #2 and #4 from Valletta, and #627 from Sliema and Buġibba go past Senglea and through Cospicua, and call at Vittoriosa's small bus terminus outside the town walls. Buses #4 and #627 continue to Kalkara and Fort Rinella. There's plenty of parking throughout the Three Cities, especially along the waterfront and in the town squares. You can get a great perspective of the Three Cities from the Grand Harbour's waters; informal tours aboard vernacular wooden boats known as kajjik depart from the harbourside in front of St Lawrence Church (daily 9am–5pm) and cost around Lm5 per boat for half an hour.

diverting collection of original artefacts such as gas masks, sirens, pickaxes and guns, and period re-creations of the rooms as they would have been when occupied during the war. Continuing north past the museum takes you over a bridge spanning the dry moat between two sets of fortifications, and through the Cover Porte Gate, the second of the three, that opens into a bare stone courtyard from which worn-out stairs head up to the ramparts; at the top, you get a good view of the complex fortifications. Across this courtyard is the third Main Gate, on the other side of which is Triq Il-Mina L-Kbira, the main road leading into Vittoriosa.

The Inquisitors' Palace

Triq Il-Mina Il-Kbira, Vittoriosa ☎21/827006, 🌐www.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm2.

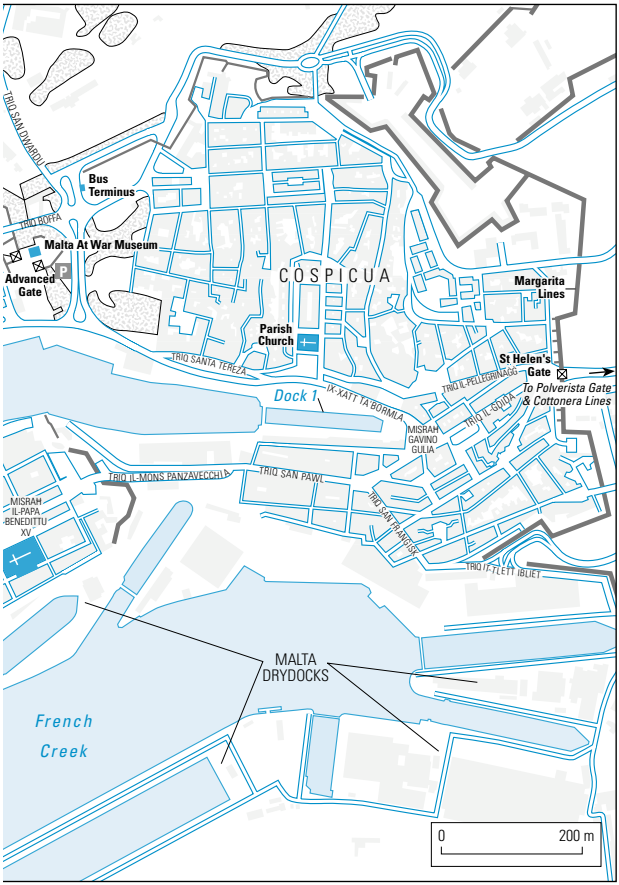
Originally built as law courts in the thirteenth century, this large Baroque building became the seat for Malta's Inquisition between 1574 and 1798. The present two-storey structure was remodelled and enlarged following damage from an earthquake in 1693; most of it has now been opened up to the public, and it makes for a fascinating place to explore. The highlight of the ground floor is the beautiful central courtyard, with ribbed cross-vaults, built by the Knights soon after their arrival in Malta in 1530. At the rear of the ground floor, you can peak into the building's musty, bare prison cells, whose only feature is a small high window providing natural light; internees' anguished graffiti is still visible on the walls. Reached via a pompous Baroque staircase, the sombre upper floor was the public domain of the Inquisitor; the largest room is the Chancery, with a worn wooden ceiling and walls holding the dull coats of arms of Malta's 63 Inquisitors. This connects to the Waiting Room, where visitors waited for an audience with the Inquisitor, which has garish faded-blue walls topped by a frieze of Baroque stone scrolls. There's an almost tangible feel of desolation both here and in the adjacent Audience Hall, where the Inquisitor entertained guests, a mood not lightened by the pink walls and Baroque friezes. Yet

▼ SENGLEA

the highlight of the upper floor is the austere Tribunal Room next door, where the intimidating Inquisitor's throne contrasts with the low stool on which the accused sat. Behind is a half-sized door, designed in order to force even the most intransigent of prisoners to bow to the Inquisitor.

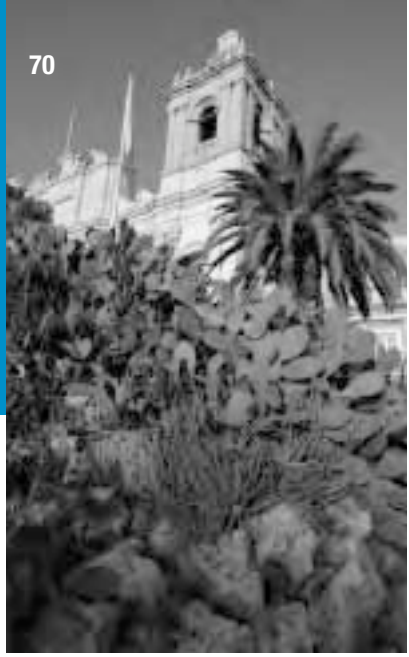
The Collachio

Vittoriosa. Home-base of the Knights between 1530 and 1571, this ancient quarter is the most attractive part of Vittoriosa. With winding pedestrianized alleys and carefully restored buildings, it's the perfect place to lose yourself on a warm afternoon. The Knights' Baroque townhouses or auberges survive along Triq Ġilda Tabone and Triq Il_Majjistral; all have been converted, with few alterations, into public buildings or private residences.



St Lawrence Church

Xatt Ir-Risq, Vittoriosa. Daily 6–9.30am & 4–6pm. Free. Evocatively reflected in the waters of the harbour's western shore, St Lawrence Church sits atop a high parapet which amplifies its size and grand setting. The original building was one of Malta's earliest medieval parish churches, said to have been constructed by Roger the Norman after he snatched Malta from Arab rule in 1090, and it served as the Knights' conventual church between 1530 and 1571. The present structure dates from 1681, and was the first of a spate of triumphal churches designed by master Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafa, who shunned ornate Baroque in favour of simplicity of composition – the unfussy, well-proportioned dome is a delight. The highlight of the otherwise gloomy interior is the altarpiece by



▲ ST LAWRENCE CHURCH

Mattia Preti – his largest ever painting, it's a tense depiction of the martyrdom of St Lawrence, infused with dark suspense.

Malta Maritime Museum

Ix-Xatt Tal-Birgu, Vittoriosa ⓣ21/660052, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm2. Situated in the British-built former naval bakery, the Maritime Museum holds an interesting collection pertaining to Malta's illustrious seafaring history. Exhibits on the upper floor are grouped by era starting with the British section, which consists mainly of photographs and models of ships alongside some compasses – fantastic and complicated contraptions that aided early navigation. The largest hall is dedicated to the Knights' naval history, with cannons, paintings of famous sea battles and various models of Knightly boats, ranging from the ceremonial vessels of the Grand Masters to a large model of a standard eighteenth-century military galley, the museum's star exhibit. It was with these robust ships that the Knights dominated the seas in the central Mediterranean – the Spanish are said to have recognized the severest of storms as the ones "which only the galleys of Malta could weather."

Fort St Angelo

Ix-Xatt Tal-Birgu, Vittoriosa ⓦwww.wirtartna.org. Contact Wirt Anta on ⓣ21/800992 before visiting to check opening hours and entry fee. This large, impressive stronghold stands as a highly impressive monument to, and symbol of, Malta's militaristic past. St Angelo served as the first Maltese base of the Knights, who enlarged it and strengthened the fortifications, so ensuring that its defences weren't penetrated by the Turks during the Great Siege of 1565. Following the arrival of the British, it passed to the Royal Navy and, with a ships' mast placed on top to make it look the part, became the HMS St Angelo, the Navy's shore establishment. The 69 World War II bombs that hit caused only superficial damage, and it remained in military use until the British forces left Malta in 1979. Since then, two decades of governmental incompetence and indifference have left the fort in need of some repair. At the time of writing, discussions

Margarita and Cottonera Lines

Cospicua is named from a corruption of "conspicuous", so-called because the town lay outside the fortifications that girdled Vittoriosa and Senglea – a fact which led to it being razed to the ground during the Great Siege. The area was subsequently rebuilt, and the Knights encircled it with an arc of fortifications known as the Margarita Lines. You can get a good perspective of this massive wall from St Helen's Gate on Triq Il-Ġdida, from where it fans out in both directions, and head through St Helen's to Polverista Gate, which pierces, and provides a prime view of, the Cottonera Lines. Protecting the Three Cities' inland perimeter and extending from – and connecting to – the walls of Senglea to the walls of Vittoriosa, these defences consist of another great semicircular wall, some twenty metres thick, which rises to 100 metres in some places. From Polverista Gate, you can also see two of the Lines' eight bastions, jutting out of the main body of the wall to provide a 260-degree sweep of fire.

concerning the fort's restoration were ongoing, and visitors were allowed to wander in and out at will for free. Behind the main gate, a ramp leads up to the ramparts of St Angelo's fortifications, skirted on top by a tarmacked road from which you can get a proper sense of the fort's scale. The road passes a chapel and the Magisterial Palace, the latter formerly the headquarters of the Knights and both off-limits, before continuing toward the cavalier tower. Beside this, a sludge-filled swimming pool and dilapidated guest rooms are the legacy of a botched 1980s attempt to convert it into a tourist resort.

Our Lady of Victories Church

Misraħ Papa Benedittu XV, Senglea.
Daily 6–11am & 4–6.45pm. Free.

Named to commemorate the Knights' conquest in the Great Siege, this imposing edifice was completely rebuilt after it was obliterated during World War

▼ KRISTU REDENTUR STATUE, OUR LADY OF VICTORIES CHURCH

▲ CASINO DI VENEZIA

II to clear the way for German aircraft to dive-bomb Malta's dockyards. The bald, architecturally uninspiring exterior with its embedded columns prefaces a sumptuous interior, with blood-red velvet curtains and massive altar, but the church is best known for its statue of Kristu Redentur, which attracts a constant trickle of believers for its alleged miraculous healing powers. A moving depiction of a bloodied Christ collapsing on all fours under the burden of the cross, the statue resides in a chapel reached through a doorway to the right of the altar.

Fort Rinella

Triq Santu Rokku, Kalkara ⓣ21/800992, ⓦwww.wirtartna.org. Mon–Sat 10am–4pm. Lm1.50. Bus #4 from Valletta, via Vittoriosa bus terminus, then a signposted 10min walk. North of the Three Cities in the town of Kalkara, Fort Rinella was erected by the British in the 1870s specifically to operate the Armstrong 100-ton gun. The largest cannon ever made, the Armstrong was designed so that its shells could pierce the steel plates of ships as far as three miles away, and hence protect the sea routes leading to the Grand Harbour; it was fired just forty times, the last time in 1905, but never actually hit anything. The fort itself is a one of Malta's few examples of Victorian military architecture, and has been sensitively restored by the Wirt Artna historic trust. The fort's heyday has been re-created via period furnishings and decor, and there are daily re-enactments at 2.30pm, when "soldiers" go through a military drill, firing cannon and musket blanks and inviting visitors to participate.

Cafés

Café du Brazil

1 Misraħ Ir-Rebħa, Vittoriosa. Daily 8am–4pm. Set in a corner of the town square, with indoor and outdoor seating, and serving modestly priced coffees, drinks, filled rolls and English breakfasts, as well as lunchtime pasta dishes.

Restaurants

Marina

12 Xatt J.B. Azzopard, Senglea ☎21/664398. June–Sept daily 6.30–10.30pm; Oct–May Tues–Sun 6.30–10.30pm. This small, pleasant restaurant on Senglea's shore affords great views of Vittoriosa, and cooks up standard Italian fare – there's a range of pasta dishes at Lm1–3, fish or meat at Lm3–6, and pizzas at around Lm2.

Bars

Il-Forn Wine Bar

26 Triq It-Tramuntana, Vittoriosa ☎21/820379. Spacious wine bar, set in an atmospheric Collachio townhouse and decorated with pieces from the owner's personal art collection. Some seventy wines are available, as are snacks, though prices are on the expensive side – a good Maltese Cabernet Sauvignon will set you back Lm5.

▲ VITTORIOSA SQUARE

Sliema and St Julian's

Sprawled along the coastline for some 4km, Sliema and St Julian's together comprise a cosmopolitan, wealthy urban centre that has now superseded Valletta in terms of nightlife and entertainment. An appealing blend of residential towns and tourist resorts, they hold the island's highest concentration of cafés and restaurants and some of its finest accommodation, as well as enjoying excellent transport connections. And while you'll have to strike out to the east to find some historical distraction by way of Fort Madliena, the area makes an excellent base from which to explore Valletta and the rest of the island, while remaining in touch with the nightlife scene.

Triq It-Torri

Sliema. Originating at Sliema Ferries, cutting across the Tigne Peninsula and skirting the coast all the way to Balluta Bay in St Julian's, Triq It-Torri sees most of Sliema's action. Hemmed by high-rises on the land side, its wide, attractive promenade on the sea side is Malta's most popular spot for passiġġata, with locals and visitors ambling along enjoying the evening air or pausing for an ice cream or *imqaret* (deep-fried date pastry) and a soft drink. The rocky belt sandwiched between Tower Road and the sea serves as a de facto "beach", with ladders allowing access into the sea. Teenage English-language students congregate around

▼ SUNBATHERS, EXILES

Visiting Sliema and St Julian's

Buses to and from all the island's resorts and from Valletta (p.62) call at the small, tourist-oriented bus station at Sliema Ferries, as do commuter boats that depart from Valletta's Il-Mandraġġ district. There's another small bus terminus on the outskirts of Paċeville, which serves the nightlife district. Late buses from Valletta and Buġibba (#49) run here during the week until 1.30am; on Fridays and Saturdays, there's also services to Vittoriosa (#18) and Rabat (#81).

It's difficult to find a parking spot in Sliema and St Julian's congested streets, so if you're driving, your best bet is the multistorey car park on High Street in Sliema's shopping zone, or the car park near the bus terminus in Paċeville.

For taxis, try the 24hr Wembley's Garage on Triq San Ġorġ (☎21/374141 or ☎21/374242); on winter weekends and on most nights in the summer, Wembley's also offer shared taxis (or minibuses if customer volume demands) to any given destination.

Ferro Bay, while local families tend to occupy the hundred-metre stretch on either side of the Surfside private lido, where you pay a small fee to rent a sun lounger and use the showers. Below the next bend in Tower Road, near the flowerbeds, fountains and playground of the Peace Garden, the area known as Exiles draws Malta's yuppies.

Balluta Bay

St Julian's. Sliema slides imperceptibly into St Julian's at Balluta Bay, with its quiet coastal street giving onto a small triangular square peppered with Judas trees, benches and outdoor seating for a handful of mediocre restaurants. Although there's no swimming to be had in the shallow, silty water which laps against the promenade's concrete embankment, the piazza is a pleasant, sunny spot, with a few cafés that make a nice place for an afternoon drink. The square's western flank is dominated by the monumental Balluta Buildings, a fantastic 1920s Art Nouveau apartment block whose arches, intricate angel motifs and terraced profile provide an ornate contrast to the other bland high-rises fringing the bay.

Spinola Bay

St Julian's. Lined with apartment blocks and home to legions of restaurants, cafés, bars and hotels, this compact, kidney-shaped resort is always bustling with traffic and pedestrians strolling along the promenade that skirts the waterline, watching the fishermen mending nets in front of their boathouses. The bay itself is thick with moored-up *luzzu*; painted in vibrant colours, decorated with Baroque designs and sporting the much-photographed Eyes of Osiris on their bows to ward off evil, bad omens and bad luck, these vernacular boats add a characterful touch. Many of Spinola Bay's restaurants have terraces overlooking the sea, and the bay makes a lovely spot to have dinner, with the lights shimmering romantically on the water.

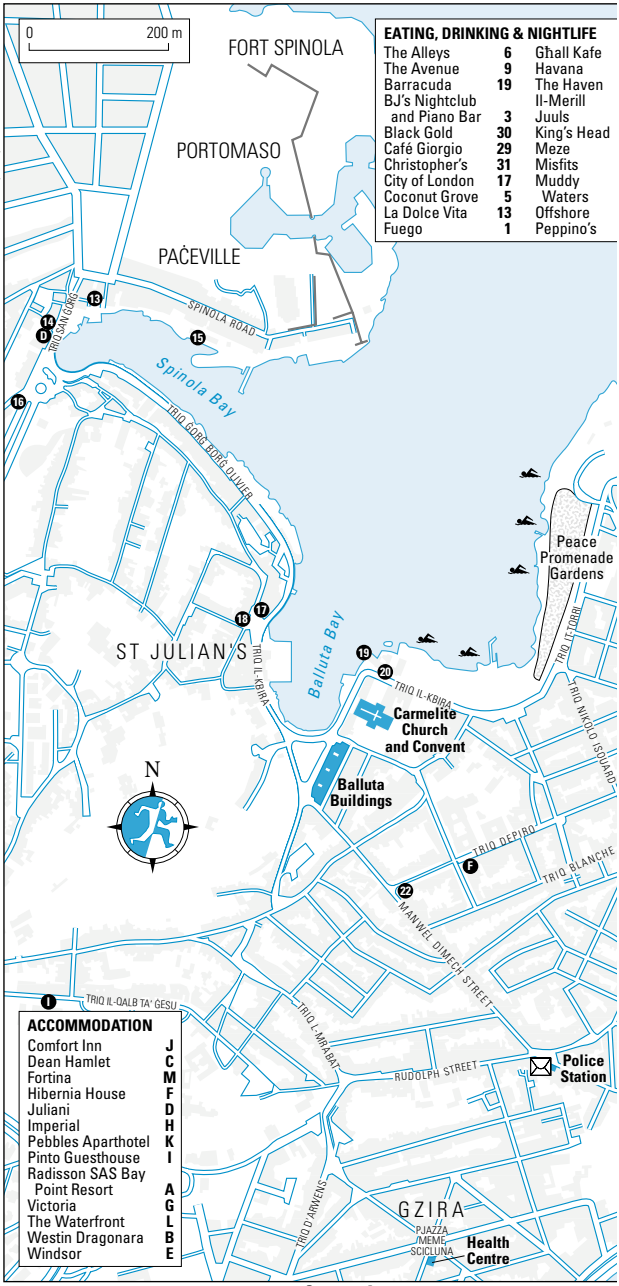
▲ SPINOLA BAY

Paċeville

St Julian's. Paċeville is Malta's prime nightlife district, with dozens of bars and clubs rubbing shoulders at ground level, and high-rise resort-style apartment blocks rising up overhead. Shabby, anonymous and pretty much deserted during the day, Paċeville is an entirely different entity after dark. Throughout the summer and at weekends in winter, thousands of young people descend and the streets become clogged with traffic. It's a merry, boisterous and generally amicable scene, with loud music blaring from the open-fronted bars and people spilling onto the pavements to avoid the crowds and the heat indoors.

Fort Madliena

Triq Il-Madliena, Madliena ☎21/335524. Sun 10am–1pm. Free guided tours on the hour. Bus #645 or

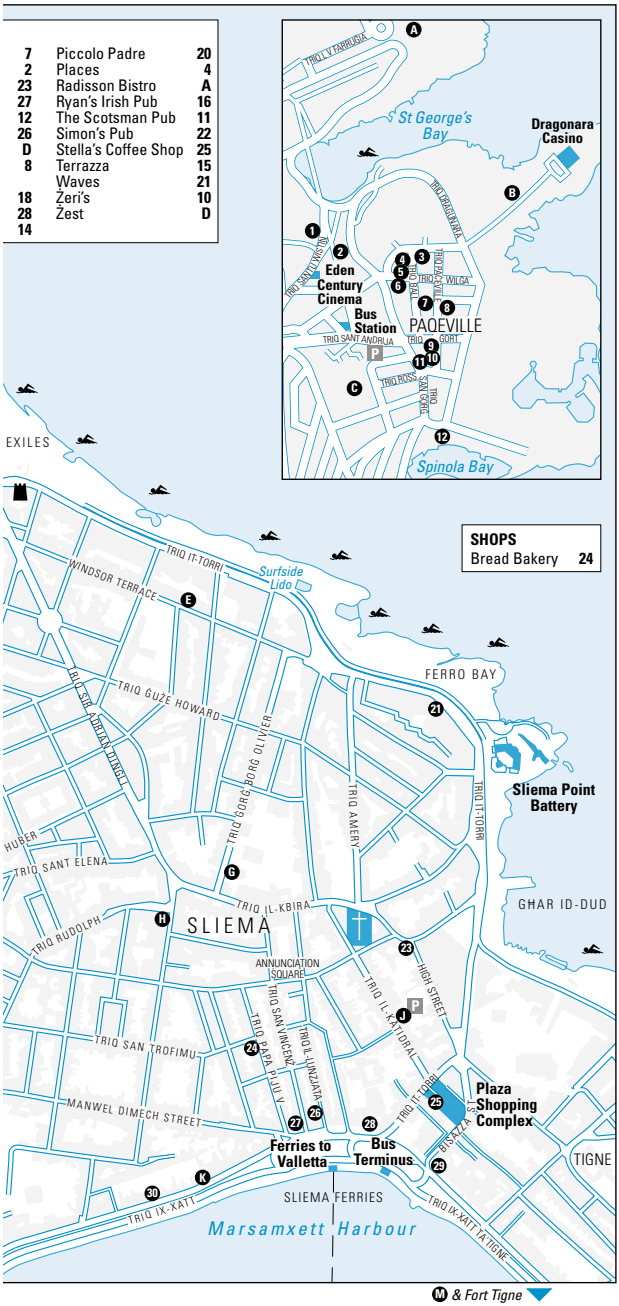


EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

The Alleys	6	Għall Kafe
The Avenue	9	Havana
Barracuda	19	The Haven
BJ's Nightclub and Piano Bar	3	Il-Merill
Black Gold	30	Juuls
Café Giorgio	29	King's Head
Christopher's	31	Meze
City of London	17	Misfits
Coconut Grove	5	Muddy Waters
La Dolce Vita	13	Offshore
Fuego	1	Peppino's

ACCOMMODATION

Comfort Inn	J
Dean Hamlet	C
Fortina	M
Hibernia House	F
Juliani	D
Imperial	H
Pebbles Aparthotel	K
Pinto Guesthouse	I
Radisson SAS Bay Point Resort	A
Victoria	G
The Waterfront	L
Westin Dragonara	B
Windsor	E


7 Piccolo Padre 20
2 Places 4
23 Radisson Bistro A
27 Ryan's Irish Pub 16
12 The Scotsman Pub 11
26 Simon's Pub 22
D Stella's Coffee Shop 25
8 Terrazza 15
Waves 21
18 Zeri's 10
28 Zest D
14
TRIQ V'ARRUSA
St George's Bay
Dragonara Casino
TRIQ DRAGONARA
TRIQ SAN VINCENZ
Eden Century Cinema
TRIQ BALL
TRIQ PAOLA WILGA
Bus Station
PAOEVILLE
TRIQ SANT ANDRIJA
SORT
TRIQ ROSS
TRIQ SAN GWANN
Spinola Bay
EXILES
SHOPS
Bread Bakery 24
TRIQ IT-TORRI
Surfside Lido
WINDSOR TERRACE
FERRO BAY
TRIQ GUZE HOWARD
TRIQ SIR ADRIAN DINGLI
TRIQ GORG BORG OLIVER
TRIQ AMERY
Sliema Point Battery
HUBER
TRIQ SANT ELENA
TRIQ IL-KBIRA
TRIQ RUDOLPH
SLIEMA
GHAR ID-DUD
ANNUNCIATION SQUARE
HIGH STREET
TRIQ IL-KATTOLIKU
TRIQ SAN TROFIMU
TRIQ SAN VINCENZ
TRIQ PAPA PIUS V
TRIQ IL-LUNZATA
MANWEL DIMECH STREET
Plaza Shopping Complex
Ferries to Valletta
Bus Terminus
TIGNE
SLIEMA FERRIES
TRIQ IX-XATT
TRIQ IX-XATT TA'TIGNE
Marsamxett Harbour
M & Fort Tigne

#652 from Sliema; alight near the Luxol football ground on the outskirts of St Andrew's, and follow the signposted route 1km uphill. The pentagonal Fort Madliena forms part of the Victoria Lines, the British-built wall of defensive fortifications that effectively dissect Malta east to west along the escarpment known as the Great Fault. Built in the 1870s to provide (alongside two others) active defence of the Lines, Fort Madliena's ramparts lie at ground level to make them unnoticeable when approaching by land or sea. The building is currently occupied by the St John's Rescue Corps, and the guided tours led by volunteers do an adequate job of filling in Madliena's history. However the view from the top of the ramparts is reason enough for visiting: to the west, the most intact stretch of the Victoria Lines winds into the steep-sided Wied Id-Dis gorge; south takes in the urban sprawl of St Julian's, Sliema and their satellites, while to the north, you can see all the way to Gozo.

Hotels

Fortina

Triq Ix-Xatt Ta' Tigne, Sliema ☎23/460000, ⓦwww.hotelfortina.com. Large whitewashed hotel, five minutes' walk from the Sliema Ferries, affording stunning views of Valletta across Marsamxett Harbour. The rooms are cosy, with mini-kitchen, TV and phone, and facilities including a range of concentrated seawater healing techniques in the Thalassa Therapy Spa. Doubles Lm90.

▼ BAROQUE TOWNHOUSE, ANNUNCIATION ROAD

Juliani

12 Triq San Ġorġ, St Julian's ☎21/388000, ⓦwww.hoteljuliani.com. The facade retains the look of a typical Baroque townhouse, but the interior is inspired by modern Asian decor. The forty-four double rooms have spacious bathrooms, large beds, TVs, phone and plenty of stylish touches; there's also a great fusion restaurant on site. Doubles from Lm40, breakfast included.

Imperial

Triq Rudolph, Sliema ☎21/344093, ⓦwww.imperialhotelmalta.com. Sizeable Baroque townhouse in the centre of Sliema, with classy touches such as ceiling murals, and an elegant garden framed by stone arches. The interior is quiet and cool, and the pleasant, tidy and spacious rooms have TV, a/c and phone. Doubles from Lm51, breakfast included.

Radisson SAS Bay Point

Triq L V Farruġia, St George's Bay, St Julian's ☎21/374894, ⓦwww.islandhotels.com. The most northerly of the string of upmarket hotels slung around the St Julian's coast, this cream-painted, boomerang-shaped building boasts a grand lobby, several restaurants and pools and a large gym. The spacious, sumptuously decorated open-plan rooms have all mod cons and sea views. Doubles from Lm86, breakfast included.

Victoria

Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier, Sliema ☎21/334711, ⓦwww.victoriahotel.com. In the heart of Sliema, ten

▲ DRAGONARA PALACE

minutes' walk from the seafront, this cream-coloured tower block has elegant, modern rooms decorated in warm colours and with all mod cons. There's a small pool on the roof. Doubles Lm48, breakfast included.

Waterfront

Triq Ix-Xatt, Gzira ☎21/333434, ⓦwww.waterfrontmalta.com. Conveniently situated on the fringes of Sliema, overlooking Manoel Island, this is a modern, functional and comfortable four-star with good service. The en-suite rooms are tasteful and have a/c, phone and TV; you pay an extra Lm5 for a sea view. Doubles Lm42, breakfast included.

Westin Dragonara

Triq Dragonara Rd, St Julian's ☎21/381000, ⓦwww.westinmalta.com. Situated on the coast at the outskirts of Paċeville in its own manicured gardens, this attractive maroon building is central but secluded, and has an impressive range of facilities, including a casino. Virtually all of the exceptionally large and fully equipped rooms have sea views. Doubles from Lm58, breakfast included.

Windsor

Windsor Terrace, Sliema ☎21/346053, ⓦwww.sovereignhotels.com.mt. Situated a block away from the seafront, this offers no-frills, pine-furnished rooms, including some singles, with the full range of facilities, connected by claustrophobic and humdrum corridors. Doubles Lm38, breakfast included.

Guesthouses

Comfort Inn

Triq Tal-Katidral, Sliema ☎21/334221, ⓦwww.comfortinnmalta.com. Friendly and homely, with a cosy common living room where breakfast is served. The twelve en-suite rooms – singles, twins and triples – are compact, with cheery yellow colour themes. Twins Lm17, breakfast included.

Pinto

Triq Il-Qalb Ta' Ġesu, St Julian's ☎21/313897, ⓦwww.pintohotel.com. Large family house with a pleasantly antiquated feel, and a cool, quiet interior – guests can use a kitchen and lounge with TV. The rather worn, plain rooms are spacious and have phones; most are en-suite. Twins Lm14, breakfast included.

Self-catering accommodation

Dean Hamlet Complex

Triq Ross, St Julian's ☎21/354838, ⓦwww.deanhamlet.com.mt. This complex of studios and one- to three-bedroom apartments serves as an ideal Paċeville base. Although pretty tastelessly decorated, all are equipped with a full kitchen and have fans, and there's a good communal gym and games room. Studios Lm13.

▲ STELLA'S COFFEE SHOP

Pebbles Aparthotel

88–89 Triq Ix-Xatt, Sliema ☎21/311889, ✉pebbles@keyworld.net. Bland multistorey apartment block, with 25 rather dull studios with only basic amenities – kitchenette, TV, fans and phone. However the location is central, and the rates inexpensive. Studios from Lm16.

Hostels

Hibernia House

Triq Depiro, Sliema ☎21/333859, ✉mreid@nsts.org. Malta's largest hostel, offering single-sex dorms with twenty bunks, and modern, attractive and comfortable apartments, ranging from studios with three single beds to larger units with six single beds, rented on a shared basis or as private rooms (price negotiable). No breakfast included, but there's a kitchen for guests' use. Dorm beds Lm3.45, apartment beds Lm3.90.

Shops

Bread Bakery

Corner of Triq San Trofimu and Triq Papa Piju V, Sliema ☎21/340628. Mon–Sat 5am–7pm, Sun 5am–10.30am. Traditional Maltese bakery offering a good range of crunchy, dense and inexpensive bread, from round loafs and baguettes to *ftajjar* rolls.

Cafés

Café Giorgio

17 Triq Ix-Xatt Ta' Tigne, Sliema ☎21/342456. Daily 7am–midnight. Decorated in brass and wood and popular amongst Sliema's upscale set, this elegant corner café with outside seating is great for people-watching. Good coffee and tea, cakes and snacks such as pies and filled rolls.

Offshore

4 Triq Ix-Xatt, Sliema ☎21/344791. Daily 7.30am–11pm. Small café with tables spilling onto the pavement, offering Maltese-style baguettes with a variety of fillings (though at inflated prices), tasteful music and good coffee.

Stella's Coffee Shop

Level 3, Plaza Shopping Complex, Triq It-Torri, Sliema ☎21/330205. Mon–Sat 9am–7pm. Friendly, unpretentious and cosy café that's packed with office workers at lunchtimes, but relatively quiet otherwise. Tortillas and Maltese-style baguettes are the speciality, and there's also an array of relatively inexpensive Italian coffees, cakes and snacks.

Restaurants

The Avenue

Triq Gort, Paċeville ☎21/311753. Mon–Fri noon–2.30pm & 6–11.30pm, Sat 6–11.30pm. Cheerful place

with funky decor and industrious service that manages to keep up with the groups of young Maltese who come here for the massive portions and inexpensive prices. The large menu of mostly Sicilian dishes – from pasta and pizzas to grilled meats and fish – also includes English breakfasts, burgers and omelettes.

Barracuda

195 Triq Il-Kbira, St Julian's ☎21/331817. May–Oct daily 7–10.30pm; Nov–April Mon–Sat 7–10.30pm. Popular with the business classes, with suitably formal decor and pompous service, and an extensive wine list. The cuisine is creative Italian, the tastes subtle and the pastas have minimal amounts of sauce. Fish dishes are adventurous yet perfectly cooked. Mains around Lm6.

Christopher's

Ta Xbiex Marina, Ta Xbiex ☎21/337101. Mon–Sat 8–10.30pm. Just west of Gzira's waterfront garden and facing the southwest shore of Manoel Island, this is one of Malta's best restaurants, with appealing pastel and oak decor, impeccable service, an impressive wine list and artistically presented classic French cuisine. The creatively executed menu is changed seasonally; main courses normally include partridge, duck, game, corn-fed chicken and a daily selection of fish dishes. About Lm10 for main courses.

La Dolce Vita

Triq San Ġorġ, St Julian's ☎21/337036, ✉dolcevita@euroweb.net.mt. Daily 6.30–10.30pm. Proficient modern Italian cuisine, with a special emphasis on fish, served amid abstract art pieces in the main cream-coloured dining room or on a terrace overlooking the romantic Spinola Bay. Main dishes are around Lm7.

Għall Kafe

Triq Ball, Paċeville ☎21/359694. Daily 24hr. Garish decor and indifferent service notwithstanding, this is the area's only 24-hour restaurant. You can visit simply for drinks or coffee, or opt for palatable staples such as spaghetti bolognese or carbonara, pizzas, burgers and steaks, all at relatively inexpensive prices.

King's Head

4 Triq Il-Lunzjata, Sliema ☎21/384122. Mon, Tues & Thurs–Sat 10am–2pm & 6–10pm, Sun 10am–2pm. The basic decor may be uninviting, but the no-nonsense Maltese home cooking is good. Starters include chicken soup and *timpana* (oven-baked pasta), both for Lm0.50, while main courses, served with chips or baked potatoes, include *bragioli* (meat stuffing wrapped in thin steak and baked in gravy) or *pulpetti* (deep-fried balls of minced meat with herbs) at Lm2.

Il-Merill

Triq San Vinċenz, Sliema ☎21/332172. Mon–Sat 6–10pm. All rustic wooden beams, chipped walls and traditional collectibles such as gas lamps, this family-run place offers inexpensive but warts-and-all Maltese home-style cooking: most things overcooked, meats are universally drenched in gravy and pasta heavy on the sauce. Nonetheless, service is attentive, and the plates are heaped.

Peppino's

Triq San Ġorġ, St Julian's ☎21/373200. Mon–Sat noon–3pm & 7–10pm. Popular with Malta's high society, with a menu of fine continental dishes, especially French and Italian; try the rich fillet steak with pepper sauce.

▲ PICCOLO PADRE

Tables are set on two floors – downstairs doubles as a wine bar, while upstairs is more elegant, with black tables draped with white and pink tablecloths. About Lm6 for main courses.

Piccolo Padre

195 Triq Il-Kbira, St Julian's ☎21/344875. May–Oct daily 7–10.30pm, plus Nov–April Sun 12.30–2.45pm. Proficient and cheerful pizza and pasta house in a pleasant and informal setting. Starters include bruschetta and focaccia, and there are some good pasta options such as linguini with shellfish in olive oil and garlic; the pizzas are among the best in Malta. Mains around Lm3.

Radisson Bistro

St George's Bay, St Julian's ☎23/751198. Daily 24hr. Open to nonresidents, this 24-hour in-hotel bistro is more than just a convenient place to have a quick bite late at night. Alongside a wide-ranging menu that runs from sandwiches and burgers to seafood are some creative and excellent French fusion dishes such as duck breast in a sesame crust served with spinach, and honey and lime sauce, at Lm6.

Terrazza

Spinola Bay, St Julian's ☎21/384939, ⓦwww.terrazzamalta.com. Daily noon–11pm. Boasting great bay views, the outdoor terrace is lovely in summer, while in winter the operation moves into two funkily decorated rooms, one of which doubles as wine bar. The creative, Maltese-rooted fusion food is impeccable – try a starter of baked Gozitan cheese coated with honey and sesame, or main dishes such as fillet steak with gorgonzola and roasted walnuts. Mains around Lm6.

Żeri's

19 Triq Paċeville, Paċeville ☎21/359559. Tues–Sun 7–11pm. A small, intimate space with dark tables, abstract art pieces and a Maltese timber balcony. From a regularly changing menu, the Mediterranean dishes are infused with Asian ingredients and cooking styles – you might have beef marinated in sweet chilli, or grilled lamb fillets with mango chutney and curry sauce. Mains Lm3.50–5.

Zest

Hotel Juliani, 12 Triq San ĠOrġ, St Julian's ☎21/387600. Mon–Sat 7–11.30pm. A mixed bill of Mediterranean and Asian fusion cooking, with dishes such as rabbit fried Thai style with oyster sauce and jasmine rice for Lm6; there's also sushi and sashimi for about Lm4 per head.

Bars and clubs

The Alleys

Triq Wilga, Paċeville ☎21/372246, ⓦwww.at-the-alley.com. Daily 9pm–4am. Malta's most popular rock

bar is almost always packed at weekends, as well as for the free concerts featuring Maltese rock bands on Thursdays. Popular rock is the usual soundtrack.

BJs Nightclub and Piano Bar

Triq Ball, Paċeville ☎21/377642. Daily 10pm–4am. Hosting frequent live bands – mostly soul, jazz, and rock acts hailing from the 1960s to the 1980s – this place attracts an older crowd than most other Paċeville venues, with rows of sofas as well as a stand-up bar. It's busiest from Thursday to Saturday, quiet on other nights.

Black Gold

Triq Ix-Xatt, Sliema ☎21/394808. Daily 9am–1am. The regular watering hole for yacht-hands based at Marsamxett Harbour, with smoky wooden decor and lots of mirrors. Boisterous and beer driven, with a playlist of old rock songs that often triggers impromptu singalongs, it's likely to stay open until the morning when busy. TV screens air sporting events, often football.

City of London

193 Triq Il-Kbira, St Julian's ☎21/331706, ⓦwww.cityoflondonmalta.com. Daily 10am–1am. The quiet and sunny terrace is ideal for daytime coffees and snacks, while in the evenings, the jukebox bar attracts a mixed clientele, ranging from intellectual types and British expats to crowds of middle-class youngsters. Some weekends tend to see a rather poor, conversation-suppressing selection of loud music.

Coconut Grove

Triq Wilġa, Paċeville ☎21/333385. Daily 7.30pm–4am. Daily DJ's play classic and commercial rock for a young crowd of Maltese teenagers who've made this their one-stop hangout. Upstairs is *Remedy* (June–Sept Wed & Fri–Sun 9pm–4am, Oct–May Fri & Sat 9pm–4am), dedicated to head-banging heavy metal.

Fuego

Triq Santu Wistin, St Julian's ☎21/386746, ⓦwww.fuego.com.mt. Daily 10.30pm–4am. The most

▼ ŻERI'S

▲ FUEGO

popular Latin club in Malta, with themed decor, plenty of tequilas and south American cocktails, and commercial Latin music alongside a bit of pop. One of the few places that cranks up a glar virtually every night of the week, with an inebriated and hormone-driven atmosphere.

Havana

Triq San Ġorġ, Paċeville ☎21/374500, ⓦwww.havanamalta.com. Daily 9pm–4am. Despite its reputation as a pick-up joint and its jaded commercial play-list, Malta's only hip-hop club remains popular with local hip-hop followers and young tourists, particularly British and English-language students, and is usually sweaty and full on weekends.

Juuls

7 Triq San Ġużepp, St Julian's ☎21/373579. Tues–Sun 8.30pm–1am. This small bar with tasteful music and a lively atmosphere attracts a fashion-conscious crowd that's a little older, and more mellow, than the youthful vibe that dominates Paċeville. It gets pleasantly full on weeknights, but is overflowing at weekends, with customers spilling out onto the pavement.

Meze

Hotel Juliani, 12 Triq San Ġorġ, St Julian's ☎21/376444. Daily 7–11.30pm. Funky blue walls, rough-cut granite tiles, large bar counter and a scattering of tables in what is probably Malta's most popular wine bar. Large, relatively expensive range of wines and light and good side platters such as dips, salads, soups, stuffed vine leaves, calamari fritters and so on.

Misfits

Triq Paċeville, St Julian's ☎21/378725, ⓦwww.misfitsbar.com. Daily 9pm–4am. The oldest and still the most innovative of Malta's DJ bars, this is an arty, friendly place decorated in warm, dim hues, and frequented by arty, cultured types looking for something beyond the next sexual conquest. The ever-creative music policy revolves around chilled ambient and world sounds, while at weekends, DJs play house for a dancing crowd. There are also occasional guest spots from foreign DJs or musicians, and arthouse films are screened every Tuesday at 8.30pm (May–Oct; free).

Muddy Waters

56 Triq Il-Kbira, St Julian's ☎21/374155. Daily noon–1am. A boisterous rock and blues bar, busiest on Thursdays, when young locals flock in for local live bands (Oct–May only).

Pleasantly full at weekends, but tends to get quiet on weeknights.

Places

Triq Ball, Paċeville ☎21/318055. June–Sept daily 9pm–4am; Oct–May Wed–Sun 9pm–4am. This spacious bar is chilled on weeknights, but livelier at weekends, with DJs playing house (sometimes hard-house or techno) for a young crowd of clubbers who use it as a warm-up venue if there's a big rave on elsewhere. With plenty of flyers advertising upcoming events, it's also a good place to scope out the latest trends in the local clubbing scene.

Ryan's Irish Pub

Triq Wied Għomor, St Julian's ☎21/350680, ⓦwww.ryans.com.mt. Mon–Thurs 4pm–2am, Fri–Sun 10am–4am. Standard, attractive Irish pub that attracts a young crowd of locals and tourists. Popular Irish tunes during the week, and pumping house at weekends. Friday nights sometimes see performances from a diverse selection of live bands.

The Scotsman Pub

Triq San Ġorġ, St Julian's ☎21/353660. Daily 9am–2am. The closest thing in Malta to an English pub, offering fish and chips and roast Sunday dinners and attracting a generally British clientele. Exhibit your singing prowess at the funny and inebriated karaoke nights (Tues, Thurs, Sat & Sun), or indulge in nostalgia in the popular Elvis-themed Friday nights.

Simon's Pub

115–116 Triq Depiro, Sliema ☎21/317008, ⓦwww.simonsmalta.com. Tues–Sun 11am–1pm & 8pm–1am. Friendly little den bristling with delightful bric-a-brac and football memorabilia, with additional outdoor seating on an attractive terrace. The inexpensive drinks, served in generous measures attract a regular core clientele, and its 26 cheerful cocktails are among the best you'll find in Malta. Music (sometimes live) is mostly rock, with due exposure given to local bands.

Waves

139 Triq It-Torr, Sliema ☎21/339690. Daily 5pm–1am. Cocktails, beers and spirits in a seafront bar that doubles as the hangout for local English-speaking teenagers who congregate around the pool table. Coffee and Internet access, too.

▼ PAĊEVILLE AT NIGHT

Mdina

Built on a ridge and ringed by fortifications, aristocratic Mdina is one of Malta's major highlights. Established by the Phoenicians, this tiny, winningly attractive walled town was Malta's first urban settlement, and served as the island's capital until Valletta took over in 1571. It's easy to detect Mdina's medieval history beneath its Baroque makeover (courtesy of the Knights following an earthquake in 1693), and its maze of narrow, twisting alleys have kept modernity at bay. Virtually car-free and with just four hundred inhabitants, it falls deathly quiet by night, while during the daytime it's a regular haunt for the tour groups. Nonetheless, a wander through Mdina to soak up the atmosphere is unmissable.

The Main Gate and Pjazza San Publiju

The Baroque gate through Mdina's fortifications was built by the Knights in 1724 as part of a restoration programme overseen by Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena, whose coat of arms (a lion and a sword, symbolizing his eminence as an outstanding naval warrior) sit at the top of the gate; the internal facade is crowned by statues of Mdina's patron saints Paul, Publius and Agatha. As part of the restoration, de Vilhena shifted the gate east (you can still see the outline of its predecessor to one side) so that it would lead directly to the planned Magisterial Palace and open onto Pjazza San Publiju.

▼ MDINA ALLEYWAY

Magisterial Palace

Pjazza San Publiju. The fourth and last of the Grand Masters' palaces built in Malta, in 1724, the Magisterial Palace was designed by the French architect Charles François de Medion. It holds a Natural History Museum (☎21/455951, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org; daily 9am–5pm; Lm1) these days, but the worn odds and ends on display are eminently missable, the

Visiting Mdina

Mdina is reached on buses #80 and #81 from Valletta, #65 from Sliema, and #66 from Buġibba. There's a car park outside the Main Gate.

▲ BUST OF GRAND MASTER PINOT, MAGISTERIAL PALACE

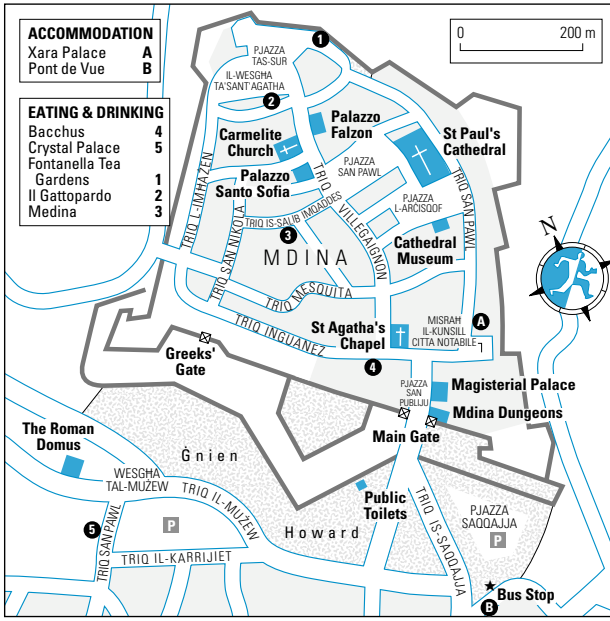
building itself being the real draw. The palace itself is set on two floors around a central courtyard; Grand Master de Vilhena spent the summers here, away from public life in Valletta, and his bust and coat of arms are mounted above the main door of another courtyard to the front of the building. The palace's interior was first pared down during its conversion into a hospital under British rule, and its splendour was further ruined when it was reopened as the museum in 1973. It's not worth paying the museum entry fee to take in the interior, as you can get a look at the palace's facade from the first courtyard.

Mdina Dungeons

Pjazza San Publiju. Daily 9.30am–4.30pm. Lm1.60. The former prisons underneath the Magisterial Palace serve as a suitable home for this rather gruesome museum, which aims to re-create various acts of torture that occurred in Malta over the ages. The graphic life-sized tableaux depicting different methods of torture under Malta's various rulers (St Agatha's breasts being hacked off by the Romans and the like), are given extra gravity by the fact that many of the acts took place in the rooms now occupied by the reconstructions.

St Paul's Cathedral

Pjazza San Pawl. Mon–Sat 9.30–11.45am & 2–5pm, Sun 3–4.30pm. Free. The principal focus of a visit to Mdina, St Paul's Cathedral is the finest ecclesiastical building in Malta – a majestic, beautifully proportioned architectural set-piece that dominates the skyline for miles around. Dedicated to Malta's most venerated saint, it was built to replace an earlier cathedral which collapsed in the earthquake of 1693. The ecclesiastical authorities saw an ideal opportunity to replace the original with something far grander, demolishing the surrounding houses to create an open square, and commissioning the best-known Maltese architect of the time, Lorenzo Gafa, to design it. Inaugurated in 1702, the present cathedral is acknowledged as Gafa's masterpiece. Unlike his peers, Gafa shunned the ornateness of Baroque in favour of composition and setting, and here he created a grand presence by designing a facade with square proportions, the width equal to the height, a stylistic technique that is unusual in churches. This is topped by an elegant octagonal dome, decorated with handsome stone scrolls and framed by squat



bell towers; both dome and bell towers were deliberately designed to look like separate appendages, as Gafa wanted them to be the only features of the cathedral visible from outside Mdina – and they're best appreciated from outside the town walls. The interior also employs skilful spatial amplification, appearing higher and more cavernous than is suggested from the outside. In terms of decoration, however, St Paul's is a lot simpler than its Valletta counterpart, St John's Co-Cathedral (see p.56). While St John's celebrates Knightly vanity, Mdina's cathedral pays homage to clerical ascetic steadfastness, with just five bronze busts, attached to the piers dividing the nave, commemorating notable Maltese bishops. The 134 variegated marble tombstones that patchwork the floor of the nave mark the graves of other venerated clerics, while overhead, the three ceiling frescoes depicting a preaching St Paul are appropriately simple and solemn. The nave's six side chapels are also modest affairs, as are the paintings on the inside of the dome. More dramatic are the two large and atmospheric paintings by Mattia Preti in the chancel: the *Conversion of St Paul* serves as the altarpiece, while the *Shipwreck of St Paul* decorates the apse above. The two chapels flanking the altar hold more rich embellishments, mostly the work of Maltese artist Francesco Zahra (1710–73). The various lunettes and cupola paintings are Zahra's masterworks, a powerful set grouped under the themes of the Triumph of the Eucharist and Triumph of the Cross.

Cathedral Museum

Pjazza Ta' L-Arċisqof ☎21/454697. Mon–Fri 9am–4.30pm, Sat 9am–3.45pm. Lm1. Housed in the former Diocesan Seminary, a two-storey Baroque pile built in 1733–40, the Cathedral Museum's artworks and historical relics constitute a valuable and memorable collection, and the largest private museum in Malta. The richest pickings are on the upper floor, where Catholic art dominates; in the first hall, Fra Salvatore di Bisignano's embossed Choral Books from 1576, which open to the size of a coffee table, are especially worth seeking out. In the adjoining oval chapel, built *in situ* during the Seminary's construction, the Annunciation altarpiece by French artist Antoine de Favray is technically good but emotionally mute; more absorbing are the twelfth-century Romanesque chalice and intricately enamelled Byzantine altar stone displayed in a recessed cabinet. The highlights of the paintings, woodcuts and copperplates from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries in the next hall are the series of 53 woodcuts and copperplates by Albrecht Dürer. The adjacent hall, with a chessboard marble floor creating a soothing tableaux of perspective, has the fantastic Polyptych of St Paul by Luis Borrassa, a large well-crafted fifteenth-century piece that's stirring in its deceptive simplicity.

Triq Villegaignon

With its numerous ancient buildings, the section of Triq Villegaignon from Pjazza San Pawl to Pjazza Tas-Sur is an excellent spot to start a leisurely exploration of Mdina. You'll first pass Palazzo Santo Sofia: it's a fine example of Siculo-Norman architecture, a hybrid style found only in Malta. Dating from 1233, its ground floor is the oldest extant structure in Mdina, while its upper floor is resplendent with two-light windows (double-arched windows divided by a column, whose arches narrow to a pitched peak), and is embellished by raised geometric shapes that are considered to be the stylistic apex of Siculo-Norman architecture. A few metres along the road, Palazzo Falzon is another Siculo-Norman building, erected in 1495 as the residence of then Vice-Admiral Falzon. It's built around a central courtyard and sports several two-light windows as well as pitched doors, the latter copied from Norman architectural styles. Now in private hands and formerly home to a museum, it was closed for restoration at the time of writing, and is expected to reopen in 2005; check at any of the tourist offices listed on p.159 for an update.

▼ SICULO-NORMAN WINDOWS, PALAZZO SANTO SOFIA

▲ MDINA HOTEL COURTYARD

Pjazza Tas-Sur

At its end, Triq Villegaignon opens into Pjazza Tas-Sur, a pleasant space shaded by ficus trees and backed by characterful houses, with a bench-dotted parapet set on the ramparts of the fortifications. The view from the square, from what is at one of Malta's highest points, is suitably impressive, taking in the whole central and northern sweep of Malta – terraced fields step down from the foot of the fortifications below towards the central agricultural plains, and on to the conurbation of the northeast coast, from the Three Cities to the south to Buġibba in the north.

The Roman Domus

Il-Wesgħa Tal-Mużew ☎21/454125, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm2.50. A repository for most of Malta's Roman relics, the Roman Domus museum is built around the remains of its star attraction, a Roman villa that was unearthed in 1881. It was built in around 50 AD, and is one of 25 Roman villas around Malta that are thought to have served as the homesteads of large agricultural estates, probably producing olive oil. The location of this building, on the outskirts of Mdina (then Malta's default capital), as well as the statues discovered within of Emperor Claudius and his mother Antonia, suggest that it belonged to a senior Roman figure. As well as its splendid mosaic floor, the villa retains other smaller, but equally fine, pieces of mosaic, the most striking of which is a rather disturbing depiction of an open-mouthed woman seemingly gripped with fear. The rest of the museum's collection is fairly pedestrian: Roman amphorae, an olive press and fragments of columns and bits of statuary, all interpreted by informative panels.

Hotels

Xara Palace

Misraħ Il-Kunsill Ċitta Notabile ☎21/450560, ⓦwww.xarapalace.com.mt. Set in a beautifully restored eighteenth-century palace, this atmospheric, intimate and impossibly romantic hotel is Malta's best. It's decorated throughout with antique furniture and portraits, while rooms have the full range of modern facilities as well as Jacuzzis; those at the back have excellent views of northern Malta. Doubles Lm85, breakfast included.

Guesthouses

Point de Vue

5 Pjazza Saqqaja ☎21/454117. Townhouse outside the walls of Mdina, where the thirteen large rooms – clean, spartan and bright, with attached toilet and shower – come in singles, twin singles, doubles, and triple singles. Doubles Lm16, breakfast included.

Cafés

Crystal Palace

90 Triq San Pawl ☎21/453323. Daily 4am–8pm. An old-style *pastizzi* joint, cluttered by Formica tables, offering some of Malta's best *pastizzi* – puff-pastry pockets stuffed with mashed peas or ricotta – as well as hot drinks and alcohol. Although cheap and filling, it's best not to have more than a couple of *pastizzi*, as the lard-heavy dough can give you heartburn.

Fontanella Tea Gardens

1 Pjazza Tas-Sur ☎21/450208. Daily: Jun–Oct 10am–11pm; Nov–April 10am–6pm. With tables spread out over the parapet of the Mdina fortifications enjoying a dreamy vista over Malta, this is a great place for a daytime coffee and cake. With the fortifications majestically lit and lights twinkling into the distance, it's even better at night, when you can visit just for drinks, or for simple foods such as pizzas.

Il Gattopardo

20 Triq Villegaigon ☎21/451213. Tues–Sat 11.30am–3pm & 8–10.30pm, Sun 8–10.30pm. A great setting in the beautiful courtyards of an old townhouse, with rotating art exhibitions on the walls and soothing classical music. The menu centres on light and delicious one-plate snacks such as lemon and coconut dahl, Greek dips, salads, sun-dried octopus or calamari.

Restaurants

Bacchus

Triq Inguanez ☎21/454981, ⓦwww.bacchus.com.mt. Daily noon–3pm & 6–11pm. Set in an atmospheric fifteenth-century ammunition store built by the Knights, with tables in the leafy garden during summer, the location is naturally romantic, and the adventurous French dishes (around Lm6) include chicken breast in wine and honey gravy, or rabbit with wine and grapes.

Medina

Triq Is-Salib Imqaddes ☎21/454004, ⓦwww.mol.net.mt/medina. Mon–Sat 7–10.30pm. Sublime setting in a restored townhouse, with tables spilling into a courtyard canopied by climbing vines. The classic French dishes are proficiently prepared, and the menu changes regularly. The service is more professional and attentive than the prices suggest – about Lm6 for main courses.

▼ *MEDINA* RESTAURANT

Rabat and the central south coast

Before the Arab invasion of Malta in 870, Mdina and Rabat formed one settlement, with a defensive perimeter wall that encompassed the whole of Mdina and what's now central Rabat. When the Arabs tightened the fortifications, they named the houses that now stood outside the fortifications rabat, an Arabic word implying a suburb. Now a sizeable agricultural town, Rabat's 13,000 inhabitants speak with a distinct accent and mostly make their living farming the verdant, fertile surrounding valleys and plains. Most of Rabat's sights date to the medieval period and are concentrated in the centre's atmospheric warren of streets, a mere five minutes' walk south of Mdina.

St Paul's Church and grotto

Misraħ Il-Parokkja. Mon–Sat 9am–5pm. Free. Rabat's busy town square is dominated by St Paul's Church, itself built on top of the cave where St Paul is said to have been interned during his three-month stint in Malta in 60 AD, while awaiting his transfer to Rome to stand trial. A church is known to have existed on this site by 1372, though the present Baroque building dates from 1653. Designed by Francesco Bounamici, who introduced Baroque architecture to Malta, its unusually wide, squat facade tapers to an elegant peak in wavy curvaceous scrolls, while the simple dome, rebuilt in the nineteenth century, and bell-towers are set well back from the street. For a church with such a lengthy history, the interior is surprisingly bare and bland – the only noteworthy features are the three seventeenth-century altarpieces: from bottom to top, a somewhat clichéd depiction

▼ ST PAUL'S GROTTO

Visiting Rabat

Rabat is connected by buses #80 and #81 from Valletta, #65 from Sliema, and #66 from Buġibba.

▲ ST PAUL'S CATACOMBS

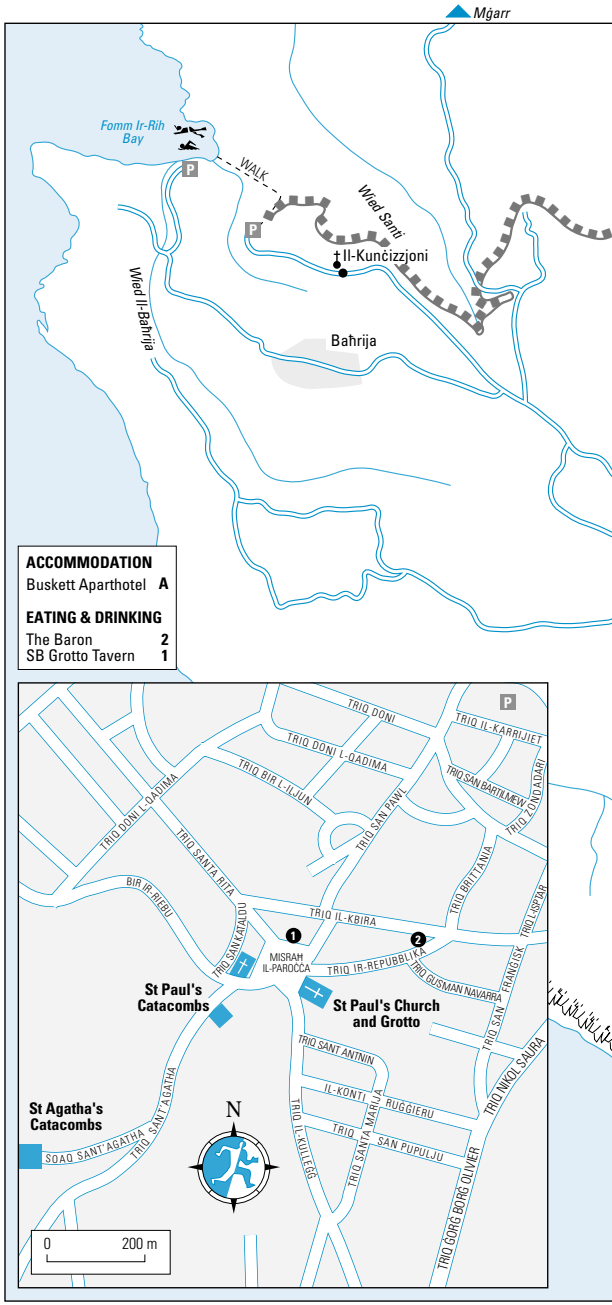
of *St Paul's Shipwreck* by Stefano Erardi, a calculated, reserved *St Publius* by Mattia Preti and an abstract *Eucharist* by Francesco Zahra. Near the church's main entrance, stairs lead down to the small, dampish and disappointingly dull St Paul's Grotto. A pilgrimage site during the Knights' epoch, and visited by Pope John Paul II in 1991, it's now more popular with tour groups than with pilgrims, with a few pieces of decoration to admire, including Melchiorre Gafa's 1667 statue of St Paul.

St Paul's Catacombs

Triq Sant Agatha ☎21/454562, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm2. A claustrophobic and dark maze of early Christian burial chambers dug in the fourth and fifth centuries, St Paul's Catacombs offer an absorbing insight into early burial methods. Set on a number of different terraced levels, the 1000-odd sarcophagi occupy every conceivable space. At the entrance stands a primitive chapel with a stone-cut altar and two circular tables with benches, where the congregation gathered to pray, mourn and feast during ritual burials. From here, there's no easily pinpointable way to tour the labyrinthine passageways; all of them end in a blank rock wall, so the best approach is simply to roam around, constantly doubling back on yourself. Now that the lids of the sarcophagi have been removed, it's possible to distinguish the different types of tomb – loculi are small rectangular recesses cut into the walls, generally used for infants and children; arcosolium tombs are dug directly into the ground; while canopied table tombs consist of a series of graves alongside each other about a metre above the floor, on shelves framed by arches.

St Agatha's Catacombs

Sqaq Sant' Agatha. Mid-June to Sept Mon–Sat 9am–4.30pm; rest of year Mon–Fri 9am–noon, Sat 9am–12.30pm. Lm0.75. With two hundred graves for adults and three hundred for children, as well as a redolent crypt where St Agatha hid in 249 AD after she fled Roman persecution in Catania, St Agatha's was in used from the Byzantine era (400 AD) through to the seventeenth century. An informative tour of the complex, which convenes every half-hour, guides visitors through the most interesting sections, and starts at the crypt, with its two adjoining chapels. The smaller one is dedicated to the Madonna, while the larger chapel, installed with freestanding altar, has several colourful ancient frescoes: the earliest three, nearest the door, are Byzantine representations of the Madonna, St Agatha and St Paul, while the others, Gothic in style and dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, depict St Agatha in various poses. From the crypt, the catacombs bore deeper into the bedrock in progressive sections, starting from a second-century pagan burial chamber complete with the almost intact original skeletons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EATING & DRINKING
The Baron 2
SB Grotto Tavern 1
TRIQ DONI
TRIQ IL-KARRIJIET
TRIQ DONI L-QADIMA
TRIQ BIR L-ILJUN
TRIQ SAN BARTLEMEW
TRIQ ZOKKO ADARI
TRIQ SANTA RITA
TRIQ SAN PAWL
TRIQ BRITTANIA
BIR IR-RIEBU
TRIQ IL-KBIRA
TRIQ SAN KATALDU
MISRAH IL-PAROCCA
TRIQ IR-REPUBBLIKA
TRIQ GUSMAN NAVARRA
St Paul's Catacombs
St Paul's Church and Grotto
TRIQ SANT ANTNIN
IL-KONTI RUGGIERU
St Agatha's Catacombs
SQAQ SANT' AGATHA
TRIQ SANTA MARJA
TRIQ SAN PUPULJU
TRIQ IL-KULLEĠĠ
TRIQ ĠORĠ BORG OLIVER
TRIQ NIKOL SAURA
N
0
200 m

Mġarr
Victoria Lines
N
Mosta
Chadwick Lakes
Mtarfa
Mdina
Rabat
Valletta
See inset for detail
Dominican Monastery
Wied Il-Fiddien
Wied L-Isqof
Dingli
Verdala Palace
Il-Buskett
Clapham Junction Cart Ruts
Wied Il-Girgenti
Dingli Cliffs
0
1 km

▲ DOMINICAN MONASTERY, RABAT

in open sarcophagi, and leading to a sixth-century Christian burial section hollowed around a small, oval chapel with a primitive altar and a fresco altar-piece imbued with symbolism – the shell represents heaven, the pigeons the soul, and the tree life.

Dominican Monastery

Triq Ġorġ Borg Olivier. Daily dawn–dusk. Free. Now numbering only twenty members, Malta's order of Dominican monks arrived here from Sicily in 1450, and built their convent over a cave dedicated to Our Lady of the Grotto, which had become a place of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages after a hunter claimed he had an apparition of the Madonna inside it. The original convent building was renovated and expanded, with the addition of a larger church, in 1683, and the public are allowed access to the courtyard and cloister, and the convent church (the monks' living quarters span the upper floor). The elegant cloister features a ribbed barrel-vaulted ceiling, while balustrades and loggias overlook the courtyard garden, with its groves of orange trees criss-crossed by pathways. Entrance to the church is through a doorway in the cloister: dedicated to Our Lady of the Grotto, its interior is simple and bathed in light; near the front door a staircase leads down to the original grotto, now a separate chapel where elder townsfolk gather in the afternoons to say the rosary.

Verdala Palace and Il-Buskett

Triq Il-Buskett, Il Buskett. Bus #81 from Valletta and Rabat. Malta's only mature, self-generating woodland, Il-Buskett makes a great spot for a picnic and a stroll. It was created by the Knights in the seventeenth century to serve

Clapham Junction Cart Ruts

Named by British archeologists after the similarly intricate web of railway lines at Clapham Junction station in London, this jumble of parallel grooves cut into the rocky plateau west of Il-Buskett comprises the densest network of such ruts in Malta (similar channels are found all over the Mediterranean, but are more numerous in Malta than anywhere else in the region). The cart ruts pose an archeological puzzle, since no satisfactory explanation exists as to their origin. The most accepted – although hazy – hypothesis is that they were made by wheeled carts during the Bronze Age (2000–1400 AD), but the problem with this theory is that the ruts have no apparent destination or pattern: some of them peter out, while others disappear into the sea or halt at cliff-edges – even the tiny islet of Filfla (see p.128) off Malta's south coast is webbed by cart ruts. The mystery is deepened by the fact that in some places, such as Clapham Junction, multiple sets of ruts cross over one another. The debate on the possible date and origin of the cart ruts continues, with explanations ranging from the simple (that they were water channels, for example) to the bizarre (that they were made by aliens).

▲ IL-BUSKETT GARDENS AND VERDALA PALACE

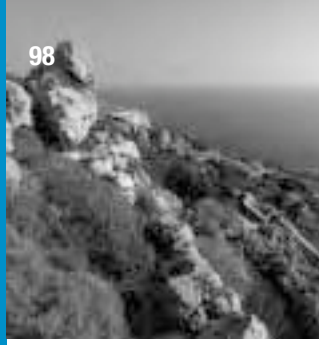
as the private hunting grounds around Verdala Palace, which was commissioned in 1586 by Grand Master Hugues Loubenx de Verdalle as a country retreat. These days, the palace is the Maltese president's summer residence, and hence closed to visitors, but you can get a glimpse of its turreted exterior rising above the grove of aleppo pines that surround it. The Il-Buskett woodlands are open to visitors, though, and are reached via a snaking road immediately west of the palace. This ends at a car park, from where a path threads down the valley into the dense web of aleppo pines, Mediterranean oaks, olives and carobs. Overhung by gnarled, hollowed tree-trunks, the path follows the meanderings of a small stream in the wet winter season, and you might see the passerine songbirds which come here to drink. In September and October, flocks of migrating birds of prey, including honey buzzards and harriers, roost in the trees and attract birdwatchers – sadly, hunters also occasionally sneak in to take pot-shots at the birds.

Fomm Ir-Rih Bay

No public transport. One of Malta's wildest and most beautiful spots, hemmed in by cliffs and clay slopes eroded into dramatic gullies, the pebbly beach at Fomm Ir-Rih is a good spot for snorkelling on calm days (take care to avoid the potentially ankle-twisting rocks in the shallows, though). When the wind is blowing from the north or northwest, however, the bay seems true to its name, which

Il-Kunċizzjoni coastal walk

The rugged and wild coastal landscape west of Rabat offers some wonderfully scenic walking, though you'll need your own transport to get here. Some of Malta's highest land, the area affords lovely views over northwestern Malta, and all the way to Gozo, with the dramatic Ta Ċenċ cliffs on the horizon. A short and easy walk begins at Il-Kunċizzjoni (signposted from Rabat), a tiny farmer's hamlet established in 1731. The main approach road into the village passes a small chapel, then peters out after 500 metres at a small clearing where you can park. From here, a path leads inland, at a slight incline, for 200 metres to a rocky bluff that marks the tail-end of the Great Fault. This geological fault divides Malta along its centre, and the British built the Victoria Lines defensive wall along it in the 1870s. The wall peters out here at the bluff, which is backed by crumbling defensive underground positions. An opening in the wall leads down the hill past dry-stone fields for about a kilometre, when it reaches the cliff that girdles the large dramatic bay below, Fomm Ir-Rih. You can double back here, or follow the steep path down the slope to the bay.



▲ SOUTHERN COASTAL CLIFFS

means "the mouth of the wind" – the usually clear, azure water becomes metallic and opaque, and large waves make swimming dangerous. To get to Fomm Ir-Rih from Il-Kunċizzjoni or Rabat, follow the signposts to the small modern town of Bahrija. Drive straight through along the town's main road, take the first right; some 2km further, after the road starts meandering downhill, take another right which ends in a small car park. From here, a footpath, which runs precariously along a ledge at the start, descends to the pebbly shore – it's around ten minutes' walk from the car park.

Hotels

Buskett Aparthotel

Il-Buskett, Rabat ☎21/454266, ℻21/455949. A good budget base in a rural location near Il-Buskett, though you'll need your own transport to get to it. The three basic double rooms have fans and shared bathrooms, while the thirteen spacious but stark one- to three-bedroom apartments have full kitchens. Doubles Lm10, one-bedroom apartments Lm15.

Restaurants

The Baron

3 Triq Ir-Repubblika, Rabat ☎21/455561. Daily 10am–11pm. Friendly and informal place for fast, no-nonsense meals – generous portions of pasta, such as tortellini with bolognaee, for under Lm2.50. There's also palatable meat, chicken, and fish pies, alongside focaccia with various fillings for Lm0.80. Traditional feasts, of rabbit or horsemeat, need to be ordered a day in advance.

SB Grotto Tavern

Misraħ Il-Parroċċa, Rabat ☎21/455138. Mon–Sun noon–2.30pm, plus 7–10.30pm Sat. A large restaurant set in a cellar, with three themed rooms, offering creative French dishes (around Lm4) ranging from chicken breast stuffed with prawn mousse to snails baked in butter and garlic. They also do the best Swiss fondue in Malta, for Lm6.15 per person. The complex also has a cave decked out as a wine bar, where wine and accompanying antipasti can be had in a characterful and comfortable setting.

▼ SB GROTTO TAVERN

Central Malta

A densely populated string of towns forming a suburban girdle around the capital, genteel, close-knit Attard, Balzan and Lija together make up the Three Villages, backed by open fields and offering addresses that are as desirable today as they were when the Knights built country retreats here. It's easy to devote a pleasant half-day to strolling around, taking in the elegant parish churches and fine old townhouses, alongside the splendid garden at Ġnien Sant Anton – and the fact that few tourists bother to explore adds to the allure. Just northwest, busy but characterless Mosta is worth visiting for its bulbous Mosta Dome, claimed to be Europe's third-largest.

Attard

Fringed by grand detached villas, the Three Villages are characterized by a core of shaded alleys clustered quaintly around medieval parish churches. The focal point of a visit to Attard is St Mary's Church (daily 7–10am & 5–7pm. Free), set in the compact, quiet pedestrianized Pjazza Tommaso Dingli. Designed in 1613 in the form of a Latin cross, the small Renaissance-style building is the most architecturally outstanding pre-Baroque church in Malta, with a simplicity that belies its beauty. It has a single turret-like bell tower and three domes, the main cupola flanked by two smaller ones, their summits painted a striking pomegranate red. Inside, square panels covering the domes and vault add textural detail, while Renaissance flower motifs frame the few paintings on the walls of the nave; more striking, however, are the enchanting statues of saints mounted high in recessed niches in the chancel. Five minutes' walk north, along Triq Il-Kbira and then Triq Sant' Anton, takes you to Attard's other notable sight, Ġnien Sant' Anton (daily 7am–sunset; free). This was

▼ ĠNIEN SANT' ANTON, ATTARD

Getting to the Three Villages

The best way to explore the Three Villages is on foot, and although there's only a kilometre or so between each centre, it's hard to determine where one community ends and the next begins. All three are served by bus #40 from Valletta.

originally established as the private garden of San Anton Palace, built by the French Grand Master Antoine de Paule in 1623. It then housed other Grand Masters, as well as various governors under British rule; it's now the official residence of Malta's president, and not open to the public. Enclosed by high perimeter walls and still retaining the intimate feel of a private estate, the gardens are open to visitors, and make a lovely spot for a stroll. Dotted with towering palms, oaks, ficus, cypresses and citrus groves, the gardens are laid out around a grid pattern of cobbled paths, with every transverse intersection decorated by a stone fountain and a pond that's home to turtles, ducks, swans and goldfish.

Lija & Balzan

Northeast of Attard, head along the narrow, ruler-straight Triq Sant' Anton to take in its string of large, affluent-looking houses. Dating from the eighteenth century, the older ones boast intricate Baroque facades, while those dating from Malta's period of British rule have rather English front gardens and bay windows. Some sport turret-like lookout towers that illustrate the siege mentality of their original owners, who clearly felt vulnerable living outside Malta's fortified towns. There's little focus for your exploration in nondescript Balzan; it's best to press on along Triq Il-Kbira to the centre of Lija. Here, Triq Sant' Andrija is another atmospheric alley of seventeenth century Baroque townhouses. The smorgasbord of alleyways northwest of Triq Sant' Andrija and west of the main church represent the Three Villages at their most evocative. Picturesque alleys branch off the winding

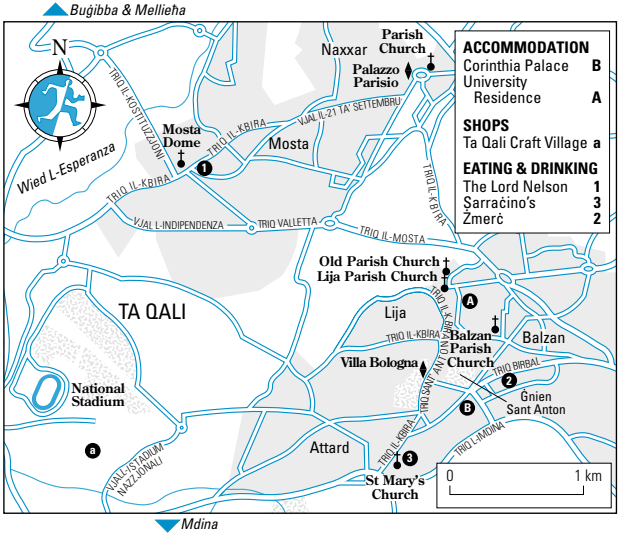
▲ LIJA STREET

streets, with the occasional clump of bougainvillaea lending a splash of colour to the facades of the handsome old houses.

Lija's central square, Misraħ It-Trasfigurazzjoni, is dominated by the parish church. Dating from the 1690s, it's an unremarkable building despite being raised on a platform and framed by two plinths; the square, however, is a major draw during the town feast held each August (see p.163), when it's used to stage one of the best pyrotechnic shows held anywhere in the world. North of the square, via Triq Sir Ugo Mifsud Bonniċi, there's some more absorbing architecture in the form of Lija's Old Parish Church of St Saviour. Although a modest early-sixteenth-century rectangular building, its interest lies in its dome which, as one of Malta's earliest, forms a stylistic bridge between the pitched roofs of vernacular medieval chapels and the grander churches of the Baroque period.

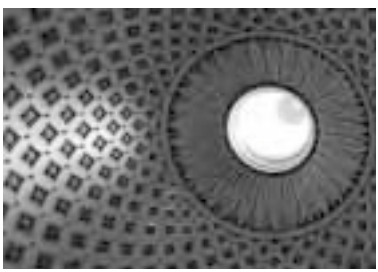
Mosta Dome

Pjazza Rotunda, Mosta. Daily 5am–noon & 3–8pm. Free. Buses #56 and #58 from Valletta, #65 from Sliema, or #66 from Buġibba. Despite its



characterless urban sprawl, the town of Mosta is squarely on the tourist trail for its nineteenth-century parish church of Santa Marija, better known as the Mosta Dome. Visible from vantage points all around Malta, the huge rotunda is undoubtedly impressive, but the feverish hype surrounding it says more about the Maltese awe of anything gigantic than about its true artistic importance. The architect Georges Grognet de Vasse designed the church with a circular (instead of a more usual cruciform) floor-plan, and also incorporated elements of the Pantheon, particularly noticeable in the portico with its twin rows of six columns, on which the bell towers seem like awkward appendages. The design was derided by the archbishop of the time, but building began regardless in 1833 and took 27 years, and the dome is now claimed to be Europe's third-largest. Illuminated by sixteen windows and a lantern light, the cavernous interior features a marble floor with an inlaid geometric pattern, while its coffered ceiling is decorated with gilded stone-carved flowers on a blue background, which swirl around the yawning dome. Giuseppe Cali painted the murals above the side altars at the beginning of the twentieth century, but they are too high up to display his abilities to any effect. Left of the altar, the sacristy is dedicated to recounting, in

▼ MOSTA DOME



▲ PALAZZO PARISIO INTERIOR

pictures and rambling text, what has been dubbed the "Miracle of St Mary". In World War II, as a three-hundred-strong congregation waited for mass, a Luftwaffe bomb pierced the dome and skittered along the floor; when it failed to explode, the parishioners put the episode down to divine intervention.

Palazzo Parisio

Pjazza Vittorja, Naxxar ⓣ21/412461, ⓦwww.palazzoparisio.com. Mon–Fri 9am–4pm, obligatory guided tours on the hour. Lm3.25. Bus #55 from Valletta, or #65 from Sliema. The sole draw of the town of Naxxar, this nineteenth-century palace in the main square rates as Malta's most opulent aristocratic home, a fantastic and overwhelming construction of frothy plasterwork that stands testament to the vanity of the Maltese aristocracy during British colonial rule. Built in the early nineteenth century by Sicilian aristocrats, the palace underwent a seven-year upgrade after it was acquired by Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna in 1898, and the extravagant interior modifications seem designed solely to impress, with rooms dedicated to the billiard table and the Marquis' carriage, as well as a private chapel and a "ladies' musical room" – the informative tour provides plenty of detail on the artworks and the owners' princely and formal lifestyle. Many of the decorative features were custom-made in Italy – the coping over the banisters is made from a slab of marble so huge that it took three attempts to transport it here (the ship sank in the first attempt, and the stone was damaged in the second), and needed forty donkeys to haul it up from port. The Italian artist Filippo Venuti was commissioned to do the paintings that decorate each room, as well as the sumptuous ceiling fresco on the first-floor landing that depicts the history of Malta, offering a romanticized take on the themes of chivalry and glory. Gilded Rococo-style stucco carvings blaze across the palace's walls, and reach a garish intensity in the ballroom, where the Scicluna's coat of arms – a white horse, representing purity and gallantry – stands proudly over a mirror. After the tour of the house, you can explore the grounds, its lawns and fountains reminiscent of a British stately-home garden.

Hotels

Corinthia Palace

De Paule Avenue, Balzan ⓣ25/441606, ⓦwww.corinthia.com. Sitting in manicured suburbs slap in the centre of Malta, the Corinthia offers pleasant respite from the chaos of the resorts. Rooms are top-notch, and the flower-themed decor and amber colour scheme adds a touch of intimacy and homeliness; there's also an on-site spa offering some fifty therapies. Doubles Lm65, breakfast included.

Self-catering accommodation

University Residence

Triq Robert Mifsud Bonniċi, Lija ⓣ21/436168. Built to house international students, rooms in these comfortable but basic three-bedroom apartments with communal kitchens and bathrooms are a bargain. Facilities include swimming pool, tennis courts and Internet access. Note that there's a ban on visitors after 11pm. Doubles Lm11.

Shops

Ta Qali Crafts Village

Vjal L-Istadium Nazzjonali. Daily 9am–4.30pm. Bus #80 from Valletta, #65 from Sliema, or #66 from Buġibba. Produced in the on-site workshops the Maltese traditional crafts on sale – from blown glass and ceramics to jewellery brassware and lace – are perfect if you're after an authentic and unusual souvenir.

Restaurants

The Lord Nelson

278 Triq Il-Kbira, Mosta ⓣ21/432590. Tues–Sat 7.30–10pm. Closed for the week following New Year and Easter, and the last two weeks of Aug. A pleasant setting in a 330-year-old townhouse decorated with traditional bric-a-brac, and consistently good French- and Italian-style cuisine. Starters (around the Lm3 mark) include pasta shells stuffed with courgettes and ricotta, or squid salad with dill, paprika, garlic and capers, while mains (around Lm7) range from tandoori chicken with cumin, cardamom rice and raita, or fish crusted with crab and served with saffron sauce and spring onion mash.

Sarraċino's

Pjazza Tal-Knisja, Attard ⓣ21/422995. June–Sept 8.30am–2.30pm & 6pm–11pm; Oct–May 8.30am–10.30pm. Inexpensive snacks, *pastizzi*, salads and filled ciabattas as well as pizzas and daily pasta dishes (under Lm3), served up in a shady and atmospheric courtyard.

Bars

Żmerċ

Triq Birbal, Balzan ⓣ21/444576. Daily 10am–2.30pm & 6.30pm–2am. Popular with young Maltese and students from the nearby university, this lively bar is busiest in the winter and is relatively undiscovered by tourists. Modestly priced drinks come with free tapas-style snacks, and there's blaring pop music as well as a big-screen TV for sports events. Inexpensive local food is available.

▼ GLASS-BLOWING, TA QALI CRAFTS VILLAGE

Buġibba and St Paul's Bay

Most of Malta's tourist traffic is concentrated around the calm waters of St Paul's Bay. Of the towns lining the bay, Buġibba is characterized by back-to-back hotels and multistorey apartment blocks – however beautification in the 1990s has left an attractive palm-lined promenade, and has gone some way to reduce Buġibba's tackiness and lack of aesthetic appeal. The soulless resort ethic has marched west towards the former fishsing village of St Paul's Bay, which for now remains a pleasantly quiet place backed by relatively untarnished coastline. The upside of all this development is that the area has plenty of inexpensive accommodation, as well as a glut of bars and restaurants of varying quality, and good public transport connections.

Buġibba

Buġibba's concentration of inexpensive accommodation means that the town sees heavy tourist traffic despite there being relatively little to do. Buġibba's pedestrianized heart, the sunny, pleasant plaza of Bay Square (Misraħ Il-Bajja) makes a good spot for an afternoon or evening drink, fringed by bars and restaurants with outdoor seating. The web of surrounding streets, especially west

▼ OUTDOOR DINERS, BUĠIBBA

Arrival and getting around

Direct services to Malta's main sights run from Buġibba's tourist-oriented bus station on Triq It-Turisti. Main routes are: #58 to Valletta; #48 to Ċirkewwa via St Paul's Bay and Mellieħa; #70 to Sliema; #652 to Għajn Tuffieħa and Golden Bay via St Paul's Bay; #86 to Rabat and Mdina; #427 to Marsaxlokk via Tarxien; and #627 to Sliema and the Three Cities. There are also late-night buses to the station, leaving Paċeville (see p.75) at 1.30am. All buses to St Paul's Bay pass through the town centre and follow the coast road. The 3km stretch between Buġibba and St Paul's Bay is covered by routes #86 and #48; from Valletta, buses #44 and #45 call at St Paul's Bay, as do the #652 and #645 from Sliema.

towards the aptly named Triq It-Turisti, are usually jammed with holidaymakers, while souvenir shops and rather tawdry bars and uninspiring restaurants stand back-to-back with tour operators offering excursions round the islands. Extending east and west around the bay from the square, the coast road is fronted by a wide promenade that offers some pleasant seaside strolling; beyond it, a rocky slope extends down to the bay's clear, attractive waters. Sun loungers are available to rent if you don't fancy planting your towel directly onto the rock, or you can head for one of the private lidos hereabouts. Good bets are Amazonia Lido (May–Oct 9am–7pm; Lm1.50 on weekdays, Lm2.50 at weekends), which has two pools, a restaurant, bars and a diving centre; or the Suncrest Hotel lido in Salina Bay (May–Oct 9am–7pm; Lm3 on weekdays, Lm3.75 at weekends), with less extensive facilities but lots of space.

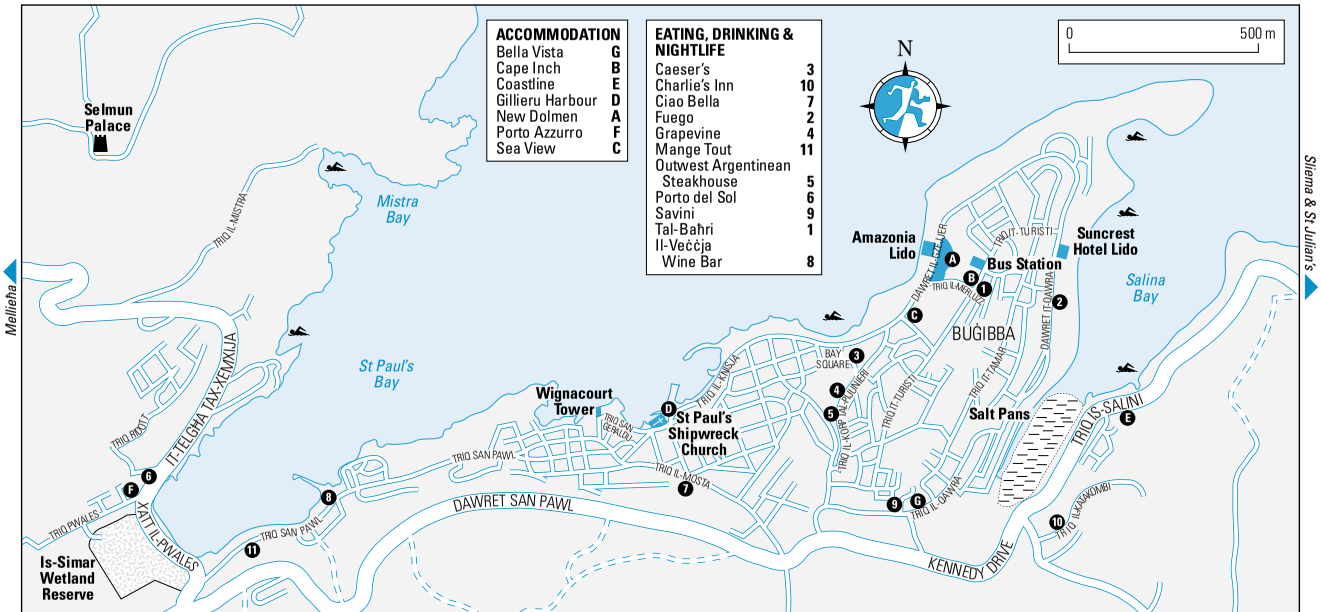
St Paul's Bay

Buġibba meshes imperceptibly into St Paul's Bay, its ribbon of development skirting the coast towards the inner mouth of the bay itself and erupting into a mass of apartment blocks on the opposite side. Lying to the south of the Wignacourt Tower, and with a compact old centre of simple Baroque townhouses clustered around a small parish church, St Paul's bay was originally a small fishing outpost, and though the small remaining fleet lends it a picturesque aspect, it's tourism that now holds sway, and the town has a part-residential, part-resort feel. Yet with only a handful of bars and restaurants, St Paul's Bay is Buġibba's modest sister – minus the congestion and the touts – and

▲ ST PAUL'S SHIPWRECK CHURCH, BUĠIBBA

St Paul's shipwreck

The history of St Paul's Bay is firmly rooted in the story of the saint himself, who was shipwrecked here during his voyage to Rome to stand trial for heresy in 60 AD. St Paul quickly proved his miraculous qualities after he survived a snakebite – Maltese snakes, so the story goes, ceased to be venomous thereafter – and then spent three months in Malta converting the population to Christianity. St Paul's story is now firmly embedded in the Maltese national ethos; the date of the shipwreck, February 10, is a national holiday, and Paul is Malta's most revered saint, while the spot where he scrambled ashore, where Buġibba and St Paul's Bay meet, is commemorated by the small (and surprisingly uninteresting) St Paul's Shipwreck Church.


ACCOMMODATION
Bella Vista G
Cape Inch B
Coastline E
Gillieru Harbour D
New Dolmen A
Porto Azzurro F
Sea View C
EATING, DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE
Caeser's 3
Charlie's Inn 10
Ciao Bella 7
Fuego 2
Grapevine 4
Mange Tout 11
Outwest Argentinean Steakhouse 5
Porto del Sol 6
Savini 9
Tal-Baħri 1
Il-Veċċja Wine Bar 8
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TRIQ IL-MISTRA
St Paul's Bay
IT-TELGĦA TAX-XEMXIJA
TRIQ IR-ROST
TRIQ PWALES
XATT IL-PWALES
Is-Simar Wetland Reserve
TRIQ. SAN PAWL
DAWRET SAN PAWL
Wignacourt Tower
TRIQ SAN PERUZZU
St Paul's Shipwreck Church
TRIQ IL-KANSJA
TRIQ IL-MOSTA
BAY SQUARE
TRIQ IL-KONT TAL-PALUMBER
TRIQ IT-TURIST
Amazonia Lido
DAWRET IL-PRUJER
TRIQ IL-MEDITERRANJU
Bus Station
TRIQ IT-TURISTI
Suncrest Hotel Lido
DAWRET IT-TRAMUNTANA
BUĠIBBA
TRIQ IT-TAMAR
Salt Pans
TRIQ IS-SALINI
Salina Bay
TRIQ IL-KAKKOMBI
KENNEDY DRIVE
TRIQ IL-DAWRA
Mellieħa
Ghajn Tuffieħa & Golden Bay
Mosta
Sliema & St Julian's

▲ NIGHT HERON

provides a peaceful alternative to its neighbour's chips-and-vinegar seaside tack.

Wignacourt Tower

Triq San Ġeraldu ⓣ21/215222. Wed–Mon 9.30am–noon, plus Wed 1–3pm. Lm0.50. Built in 1609 to guard the entrance into St Paul's Bay, Wignacourt Tower is one of the largest of the defensive chain built by the Knights around Malta's coastline. A squarish, boxy design, its walls rising solidly to four partly embedded corner turrets, it's now an absorbing museum. The ground floor holds a small exhibition that illustrates the Knight's military architecture in Malta via prints of the designs and models of some of the varied defence structures scattered throughout the islands. The first floor, meanwhile, re-creates the living quarters of the *capomastro* (master bombardier), who was in charge of the tower with the assistance of two gunners. The soldiers led a plain, rather monastic life here, as evidenced by the undecorated bed, table and benches, and the stone cooking hearth. A further staircase leads to the roof, where one of the two original cannons survive, and which affords a lovely view that takes in the entire sweep of St Paul's Bay.

Is-Simar Wetland Reserve

Triq Pwales, St Paul's Bay ⓣ21/347646, ⓦwww.birdlifemalta.org. Sun noon–4pm. Free. A man-made wetland created by a local birding group in the 1990s, Is-Simar represents Malta's only area of marshland habitat. Fringed with reeds and dotted with islets, its waterways have attracted new breeding species to Malta, most famously the rare and shy little bittern, and the more common reed warblers and moorhens. Its bird population increases during the autumn and spring migration period, when large colourful waterbirds offer some absorbing birdwatching. You watch them from two binocular-equipped hides that have been erected, while volunteers of Birdlife Malta will guide you along the path that connects the two hides, pointing out noteworthy species of flora and fauna along the way.

Mistra Bay

Although St Paul's Bay proper has no sandy beaches, its horseshoe-shaped neighbour to the north offers inviting azure sea and good snorkelling, but has little beach to speak of. Its shore consists of a strip of pebbles backed by its access road, and it doesn't tend to attract many swimmers. If you can put up with lying on the pebbles, however, as well as negotiating them as you get in and out of the water, you'll be rewarded with the opportunity to see lots of marine life

▲ ST PAUL'S BAY

around the rocky boulders that trail down to shore along the bay's western flank.

Hotels

Bella Vista

Triq Il-Qawra, Buġibba ☎21/570591, ⓦwww.bellavista.com.mt. This small hotel on the fringes of town has limited facilities: a buffet-style restaurant, a small bar and a pool boxed-in by high walls, but the spacious en-suite rooms, with plain pine furniture, small TVs and phone, are hard to beat at this price. Doubles Lm23, breakfast included.

Cape Inch

Triq Il-Merluzz, Buġibba ☎21/572025, ⓦwww.capeinchhotel.com. Convenient for the bus station, this small, friendly place offers good-value en-suite rooms with tasteful furnishings and TVs. Doubles Lm30, breakfast included.

Coastline

Triq Is-Salini, Buġibba ☎21/573781, ⓦwww.islandhotels.com. Large, imposing hotel on the outskirts of Buġibba, its stepped, pyramidal profile set back from the main coast road. The grounds are spacious, and the massive lobby and long corridors lead to large, comfortable, pastel-coloured en-suite rooms that have a/c and phones. Doubles Lm50, breakfast included.

Gillieru Harbour

Triq Il-Knisja, Buġibba ☎21/572720, ⓦwww.gillieru.com. Attractive hotel overlooking St Paul's Islands, with circular balconies and wrought-iron balustrade. The cream-coloured en-suite rooms are cheerful and have a/c, phones and TV, while the restaurant cooks up good seafood dishes. Doubles Lm33, breakfast and lunch included.

New Dolmen

Triq Dolmen, Buġibba ☎21/581510, ⓦwww.dolmen.com.mt. Right on the coast, this large hotel is something of a Buġibba institution, with a casino , and a great fusion restaurant. The exterior is imposing and tasteless and the interior garish, but the huge range of facilities include a nightclub, two pools, a private lido and watersports; the comfortable en-suite rooms have all modern conveniences. Doubles from Lm34, breakfast included.

Porto Azzurro

Triq Ridott, St Paul's Bay ☎21/585171, ⓦwww.portoazzurro.com.mt. Modern, functional and attractive mauve-painted hotel offering 25 cheerful en-suite rooms with a/c, and ninety self-contained apartments (studios

and one or two bedrooms) with ceiling fans. Doubles Lm32, studios Lm25.

Sea View

Qawra Road, Buġibba ☎21/573105, ✉seaview@waldonet.net. This small, family-run property near the sea in the centre of Buġibba is ideal as a cheap base. The 49 rooms are basic, with shared bathrooms and fans, and there's also a family room and some singles. Doubles Lm11, breakfast included.

Restaurants

Charlie's Inn

Triq Il-Katakombi, Buġibba ☎21/57345. Mon–Sat 7–11pm. Malta's rabbit dishes are renowned, and this is a great place to find out what the fuss is about. Rabbit is cooked in four different ways (all around Lm6): simmered in garlic and white wine; stewed with tomato sauce and peas; baked in tomatoes and red wine; or barbecued and served with gravy. However, bear in mind that the cook-to-order policy means a long wait for your meal.

Ciao Bella Pizzeria

Triq Il-Mosta, St Paul's Bay ☎21/580112. Tues–Sun 6.30–11pm, plus Sun noon–2.30pm. Informal eateries offering seventeen types of pizza (Lm2–3), ranging from simple toppings of tomatoes, mozzarella and Parma ham, to the more elaborate Pizza Contadina, with mozzarella, bacon, mushrooms, onions, green pepper and blue cheese. They also do grilled meats and fish and standard Italian pastas, all for under Lm4.

▼ *MANGE TOUT* RESTAURANT, ST PAUL'S BAY

Mange Tout

356 Triq San Pawl, St Paul's Bay ☎21/572121. Mon–Sat 8–10.30pm. Closed for one week in Jan, April and Aug. One of Malta's best French fusion restaurants, where the small number of tables ensures personal attention and meticulous preparation using fresh seasonal ingredients – fussiness over the little creative details slows down the service, however, so it's best for a social dinner. About Lm8 for main courses.

Outwest Argentinean Steakhouse

Triq Il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri, Buġibba ☎21/580666. Daily 6.30–11.30pm. With leopard-patterned sofas and matte red walls punctuated with Wild West motifs and a stuffed bull's head, the decor here reflects the meat-heavy menu: several types of excellent fillet steak, chicken, burgers and kangaroo fillet, accompanied by salad and potato side-dishes. Mains are around Lm8.

Porto del Sol

13 It-Telgħa Tax-Xemxija, St Paul's Bay ☎21/573970. Mon–Sat noon–2.00pm & 6.30–10.30pm. Bright and elegant setting overlooking St Paul's Bay, and cooking inspired by Italian and French cuisine. The large menu includes simple vegetarian dishes such as avocado stuffed with stilton, and main courses (around Lm6) range from roasted duckling in orange sauce to grilled swordfish.

Savini

Triq Il-Qawra, Buġibba ☎21/576927. Daily 6.30–10.30pm. Creative French dishes served in an atmospheric converted farmhouse. The extensive menu changes regularly, featuring delicious dishes such as oysters in champagne and hollandaise sauce, ravioli stuffed with mussels and herbs, and even emu in balsamic vinegar. Main course for about Lm6.

Bars

Grapevine

Triq Il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri, Buġibba ☎21/572973. Daily 6pm–1am. One of the largest and most appealing of Buġibba's English-style pubs, with the usual TV showing football games. The playlist of classics from the 1960s and 1970s, plus occasional live music of a similar ilk, is enthusiastically received.

Il-Veċċja Wine Bar

Triq San Pawl, St Paul's Bay ☎21/582376. June–Sept daily 8pm–1am; Oct–May Tues–Sun 8pm–1am. Small, cosy wine bar, with funky decor and sofas as well as tables, that draws a cultured Maltese crowd. The music is tasteful, with live jazz on Thursdays, and there are tasty snacks to accompany the 53 different wines.

Tal-Baħri

Triq It-Turisti, Buġibba ☎21/580583. Daily noon–1am. This small bar is one of the most characterful in town, with cosy wooden decor and music that flits from pop to rock – though there is the usual Buġibba distraction of football-game screenings. The friendly, chatty atmosphere attracts a mixed-age clientele.

Clubs

Caeser's

Bay Square, Buġibba ☎21/571034. Daily 9pm–3am. A small, disco-style club that dishes out commercial dance music and pop to an alcohol-fuelled crowd of British holidaymakers and Maltese on the pull.

Fuego

Dawret Il-Qawra, Buġibba ☎21/584933, ⓦwww.fuego.com.mt. Daily 10.30pm–4am. The sister operation of the successful Paċeville operation (see p.83) is Buġibba's most popular club. Beach bar-style decor, with plenty of potted palms and bamboo, South American cocktails and commercial Latin music.

▼ BUĠIBBA'S EASTERN SHORELINE

Mellieħa and the northwest coast

An absorbing mixture of sandy beaches and gentle resorts within easy reach of little-visited rural tracts, northwest Malta boasts some very scenic landscape, a series of rugged, humpbacked garigue ridges rolling into wide valleys patchworked with agricultural fields. Poised on a high ridge that commands lovely coastal views and a place of pilgrimage for the medieval shrines within what's known as the Parish Church Complex, Mellieħa is Malta's northernmost town, a relatively isolated place whose citizens still speak a separate dialect. Beyond the town proper, apartment blocks have spilled down the hillside to colonize the rims of Mellieħa Bay, the island's longest and most popular swathe of sand.

Mellieħa

Spread over the Mellieħa Ridge, Mellieħa has only recently developed any kind of a resort ethic. Following an influx of tourists over the last thirty years, the fringes of the largely anonymous residential sprawl have become peppered with a string of holiday apartments and exclusive villas that cling limpet-like to the slopes and cliffs. The narrow, sloping Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier defines the town centre, and holds a smorgasbord of small shops and restaurants, including two of the best places to eat in the islands.

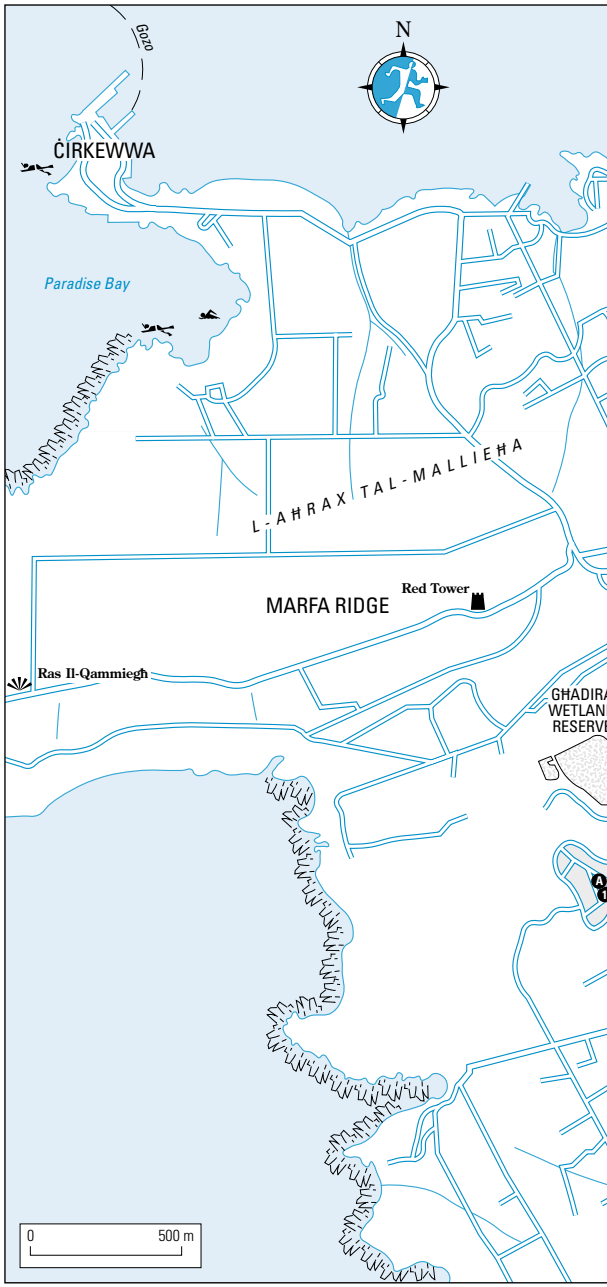
Mellieħa Church Complex

Misraħ Iż-Żjara Tal-Papa. Mellieħa's two churches are built on two levels at the edge of the Mellieħa Ridge, overlooking Mellieħa Bay. The older of the two is set in the Sanctuary, a lovely courtyard that's accessible via the Monumental Arch, a

▼ MADONNA MOSAIC, MELLIEHHA CHURCH

Visiting the area

Buses #44 and #45 from Valletta, #645 from Sliema and #48 from Buġibba run through Mellieħa's centre, and continue to Mellieħa Bay. The #45, #48 and #645 continue over the crest of the Marfa Ridge, where you alight for the Red Tower and Ras Il-Qammieġħ, and then run on to Ċirkewwa, from where it's a twenty-minute walk for Paradise Bay.


Gozo
N
ĊIRKEWWA
Paradise Bay
L-AĦRAX TAL-MALLIEĦA
MARFA RIDGE
Red Tower
Ras Il-Qammiegħ
GĦADIRA WETLAND RESERVE
0
500 m

Armier Bay
Ramla Bay
L-AĦRAX TAL-MALLIEĦA
Mellieħa Bay
EATING & DRINKING
The Arches 4
Crosskeys 6
Giuseppi's 5
Joseph Bar 1
Ix-Xatba 3
Zapp's Café 2
ACCOMMODATION
Maritim Antonine B
Mellieħa Holday Centre A
Splendid Guesthouse C
MARFA ROAD
Mellieħa Church Sector &
Air Raid Shelter
MIGĦAR
IŻ-ŻJARA
TAL-PAPA
TRIQ IL-KNISJA
MELLIEĦA
TRIQ IL-KBIRA
Valletta

Baroque stone archway built in 1716. The courtyard is flanked on the right by simple rooms built in the eighteenth century to house pilgrims, and on the left by the Church of Our Lady of Mellieħa (daily 8am–noon & 5–7pm; free). An elegant structure embedded into the rockface, the church began as a crypt and has been expanded twice since the sixteenth century to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims drawn to the fresco atop the altar, depicting the Madonna cradling Jesus in her arms and said to have been painted by St Luke in 60AD. The clutter of votive offerings lining the tunnel into the church proper illustrate the continued believe in the fresco's healing powers, though recent studies have indicated that the saint may not have painted it. The church's dimly lit interior is beautiful in its crude simplicity: the walls are panelled with marble, while the altar is framed by two marble columns and an arch topped by a crescent of gold-coloured mosaic. Opposite the Monumental Arch, a second archway and staircase leads up to the bluff that holds the Mellieħa Parish Church (daily 6–8.30am & 5–7.30pm; free). Built in the mid-nineteenth century to accommodate the town's growing population, its lean pyramidal dome and bell towers, and its setting at the edge of the ridge make it a dramatic feature of the skyline. Its interior, however, is anti-climactic, a bare stone affair with only a few paintings, and a smattering of flowery Baroque motifs.

▼ THE SANCTUARY

Grotto of Our Lady

Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier, Mellieħa. Daily 8am–6pm. Free. Across the road from the Sanctuary, a small unmarked doorway from Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier opens onto a staircase that cuts through an ivy-clogged little valley to the somewhat odd rock-cut chapel known as the Grotto of Our Lady. The only decoration under the slightly pitched roof is an unremarkable statue of the Madonna enclosed by a metal grille, with a pond fed by an underground spring at its foot; both are said to have miraculous healing powers. Many still have faith in the redemptive properties, as evidenced by the multiple candles left by believers, and the votive offerings nailed to the walls.

Air Raid Shelter

Misraħ Iż-Żjara Tal-Papa, Mellieħa. Mon–Sat 9am–3.30pm. Lm1. Dug to protect Mellieħa from its World War II air-raids, the town's 500 metres of underground rooms and tunnels have now been opened up as an attraction which does a good job of evoking the wartime atmosphere (though not as good as the similar exhibit in Vittoriosa; see p.66). Visits start with an introduction to life underground from the warden (who sheltered here as a child); you then follow a marked route

▲ GROTTO OF OUR LADY

around the complex. Some of the rooms have been equipped with mannequins and furniture that re-create the way the shelters looked when in use, while sound effects of children crying and bombs crashing in the surroundings lend a rather chilling ambience.

Mellieħa Bay

A kilometre or so of sand lapped by water that stays ankle deep for some 100m out to sea, Mellieħa Bay is Malta's busiest beach, popular with tourists and Maltese families alike – its shallow waters get very crowded at the height of summer. With a main road running parallel to the sand and plenty of parking, the bay's easy accessibility adds to its appeal, as do its facilities, with watersports equipment, umbrellas and sun loungers for hire, and several kiosks selling drinks and snacks. It's also a favourite spot for Maltese to indulge in the favourite pastime of cooking al-fresco – summer evenings see the sand dotted with hundreds of seaside barbecues, while an appetizing smell of grilled meats envelopes the bay.

Għadira Wetland

Mellieħa Bay ☎21/347646, ⓦwww.birdlifemalta.org. Oct–Nov & Feb–May Sat–Sun 10.30am–4.30pm; Dec–Jan 9.30am–3.30pm. Free.

The Għadira Reserve is a small protected wetland that serves as a point for waterbirds to rest and refuel during spring and autumn migration. Its two hides, equipped with binoculars, are connected by a path; volunteers from Birdlife Malta guide you from one hide to the next, pointing out notable species along the way. You're pretty much guaranteed to see chameleons in the tamarisk trees, while avian residents include golden-ringed plovers, which nest in the wetland, and kingfishers during the winter, the latter identifiable by their sharp trills as they fly low over the water. During the spring and autumn, you'll also see migrant species such as ospreys, avocets, lapwings, plovers, swans, herons, egrets and various species of duck.

The Red Tower

Marfa Ridge. Erected in 1649 and named for the dried-blood colour of its paint job, the Red Tower cuts an imposing and rather fairy-tale figure on the Marfa Ridge, a rugged crest of garigue interspersed by groves of trees planted during a 1970s reforestation drive. A boxy construction with four mini-towers at each corner, the Knights fitted the tower with cannons and stationed a brigade of 49 soldiers here, making it the main hinge of defence in this part of Malta. The British maintained its military role, using it as a signalling station during World War II. It's now been opened up to the public (Mon–Sat 10am–1pm, plus the first Sun of the month; Lm0.50), and it's worth heading inside to appreciate the interior's complex structure of arched

▲ RED TOWER, RAS IL-QAMMIEGH

buttresses, doorways and roofs designed to give the tower the strength to withstand cannon fire.

Ras Il-Qammiegħ cliffs

Marfa Ridge. Beyond the Red Tower, the narrow road that continues west along the crest of the ridge makes for an excellent walk or drive, with wonderful views on either side. Dotted with the stone huts of bird trappers and hunters, the windswept, scrubby landscape is fragrant with wild thyme, which blooms here in late spring (June sees some of the best displays) and whose light purple flowers add a splash of colour. At the head of the ridge, the Ras Il-Qammiegħ cliffs plummet down dramatically to steep slopes of clay; at the base, boulders as large as churches tumble towards a purple-blue sea. Facing south, you see the craggy meander of the cliffs and inlets that characterize the area's coastline; facing north, you can pick out Comino and Gozo. The alluring beach at the bottom of the immediate slope is Paradise Bay.

Paradise Bay

Ċirkewwa. This small stretch of sand snuggled into an inlet is the most attractive of all beaches on the Marfa Ridge peninsula, its creamy-coloured sand interspersed with boulders and stands of bamboo. The clear waters also offer some good snorkelling, and a bar serves refreshments and snacks. There's a car park on top of the bay, but if you're using public transport, note that it's a 1.5km walk to the beach from where the buses drop you off.

Hotels

Maritim Antonine

Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier, Mellieħa ☎21/520923, ⓦwww.maritim.com.mt. An attractive cream and maroon building in the town centre, with an equally swanky interior. Facilities include a swimming pool in the lush gardens and limited spa facilities, while the rooms are spacious, with TV, phone, a/c and lush en-suite bathrooms. Lm62 for doubles, breakfast included.

Guesthouses

Splendid

Triq P.P. Magri, Mellieħa ☎21/523602, ℻21/521273. Characterful townhouse in the heart of Mellieħa offering ten basic double rooms (some with three or four single beds). All have fans, but you can pay Lm2 per day for a/c, and most have with their own shower and sink, and share toilets; you pay Lm2 extra for a fully en-suite room. Doubles Lm15.

Apartments

Mellieħa Holiday Centre

Mellieħa Bay ☎22/893000, ⓦwww.mhc.com.mt. Set in neatly landscaped grounds of tamarisk trees and palms, these 150 tastefully decorated a/c bungalows have kitchens and terraces fronting the gardens. All have two bedrooms, and can sleep up to six. The Danish restaurant is reliable,

and there's a supermarket on site. From Lm24 for two, breakfast included.

Cafés

Joseph Bar

Mellieħa Holiday Centre, Mellieħa Bay ☎22/893000. Daily 10am–12.30am. The large poolside café of this holiday resort is comfortable and relaxing, nicely decorated in warm colours. Coffees, teas, cakes and snacks are served, as is alcohol, and there's live music every evening – country and western, blues, jazz and folk.

Zapp's Café

Marfa Rd, Mellieħa ☎21/576415. Daily 11am–1am). Friendly local drifters' hangout, with a TV screen often tuned into football matches from European leagues. They also serve tasty quick bites such as filled rolls, and a large range of relatively cheap pizzas.

Restaurants

Ix-Xatba

Marfa Rd, Mellieħa ☎21/521753. Jun–Oct daily 6–10.30pm; mid-Nov–May Wed–Mon 6–10.30pm. Closed for one month mid-Jan to mid-Feb, and two weeks in Nov. Unassuming but consistently creative restaurant offering standard Italian risottos and pastas, but with an emphasis on fish, mostly grilled with herbs and lemon. There are also eight types of fillet steaks, and lamb baked with herbs, as well as traditional rabbit. About Lm5 for main courses.

Giuseppi's

Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier, Mellieħa ☎21/574882, Tues–Sat 7.30–10.30pm. Converted townhouse where north Mediterranean cuisine meets Old World charm – the regularly changing menu includes daily fish-based specialities, and traditional specialities are prepared with a twist. Favourites include grilled calamari with herb sauce, and linguini with sea urchins. About Lm6 for main courses.

The Arches

Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier, Mellieħa ☎21/520533, ⓦwww.thearchesmalta.com. Mon–Sat 7–10.30pm. The classical, formal surroundings here complement the French-inspired menu, which changes every couple of weeks. The dishes are imaginative and memorable – you might have roast guinea fowl, or sea bass in a potato crust. The wine list is one of Malta's most extensive and expensive. About Lm9 for main dishes.

Bars

Crosskeys

Misraħ Tas-Salib, Mellieħa ☎21/523744. Daily 11am–1am. Popular with locals and tourists alike, this is the busiest pub in town, with cosy wooden decor, and a playlist of varied commercial music. British-style roasts are available on Sundays.

▼ *GIUSEPPI'S*, MELLIEHA

118

Mġarr and the southwest coast

Punctuated by a series of headlands cut through by deep inlets, Malta's southwest coast is both the island's least populated area and the home of its best beaches, dramatic swathes of cliff-girdled sand which are well geared up for visitors without being spoiled by development. The only town of any size is Mġarr, a diminutive farming settlement first established in the 1850s that's surrounded by some of Malta's most fertile land, particularly renowned for its strawberries. With its unattractive egg-shaped church and seemingly deserted residential streets, Mġarr itself has little to offer the visitor other than a break from sun and sea in the form of its atmospheric World War II shelter.

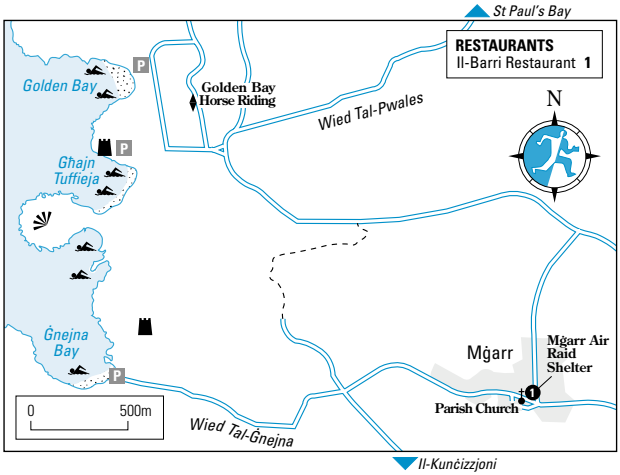
Mġarr Air Raid Shelter

Entrance via Il-Barri restaurant, Wesgħat Il-Ġublew, Mġarr ⓣ21/573235. Tues–Sat 9am–2pm, Sun 9–11.30am. Lm1. Pickaxed into the local globigerina limestone, the Mġarr Air Raid Shelter provided protection for the town's 200 residents during World War II. This was one of 841 public shelters built across the island to shield the population from the deluge of bombs that bombarded Malta in 1941–42, when the island earned the uneasy distinction of being the most intensely bombed country in the war. The claustrophobic atmosphere of Mġarr's 225 square metres of underground rooms and tunnels has been evocatively created by careful restoration. Before you enter the shelter proper, a short video about the war sets the tone. You then go into the long main tunnel, from where rooms housing the displays branch off; an audio commentary details life in the shelter. Wax-works of wounded people pepper the corridors, while the rooms, which include a chapel and a clinic, have

▼ MĠARR AIR RAID SHELTER

Visiting Mġarr and the southwest coast

Mġarr is connected to Valletta by bus #47, which continues to Għajn Tuffieħa and Golden Bay. The beaches are also served by the #652 from Sliema and Buġibba, and the #51 from Buġibba.

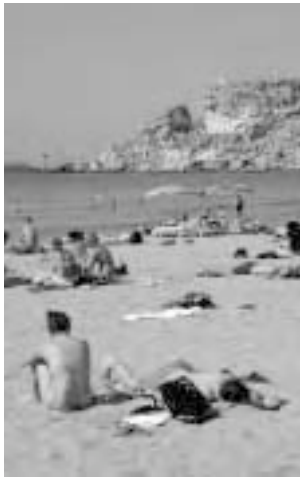


been kitted out with period fittings as they would have been when the shelter was in use. The mildewed furnishings and beads of condensation on the walls serve as a reminder of how the damp, warm air in the shelters provided the ideal conditions for the spread of disease, which became a major issue of life in the shelters – in a bid to halt the spread of contagious diseases, the wounded were kept apart from the healthy, and children separated from adults.

Ġnejna Bay

No public transport. A large, scenic bay nestled in a trough at the mouth of a valley, Ġnejna Bay is enclosed by dramatic clay slopes crowned by craggy amber cliffs and, on the highest vantage point, one of Knights' seventeenth-century coastal defence towers. Popular with families,

▲ ĠNEJA BEACH



▲ GOLDEN BAY

it's a lovely spot for a day by the sea, with clear, calm water and a small swathe of orange-coloured sand. Canoes and other watersports equipment are available to rent, and a kiosk sells refreshments and snacks all year round. A short way north of the main beach, and hidden from it by the meandering coastline, a rocky plateau surrounded by inviting azure sea serves as Malta's only gay beach. Ġnejna's watersports centre operates an informal speedboat shuttle service to the beach, costing Lm2 for drop-off and pick-up. The road to Ġnejna Bay from Mġarr is well signposted, and there's a car park backing onto the sand.

Għajn Tuffieħa and Golden Bay

Gorgeous stretches of sand separated by a gently rounded peninsula, the combination of easy access and stunning natural beauty make these twin beaches two of Malta's most attractive and popular. Both have outlets offering watersports, as well as snack bars. The southerly of the two, Għajn Tuffieħa is the more dramatic, with the typical clay slopes and cliffs of the coastal landscape hereabouts. A flight of stairs from the car park atop the cliff leads to the small crescent-shaped sandy shore, lapped by water that takes on the warm auburn colour of the seabed. Popular with image-conscious twenty-something Maltese, Għajn Tuffieħa is a whirl of brief designer swimsuits and flashy sunglasses, awash with the pungent smell of suntan oil. Golden Bay is smaller, and partly spoiled by the large multistorey hotel that dominates the bay from its cliff-top perch and, nearer the sand, the road and car park that reach down to the beach. With inviting, crystal-clear waters, it gets more crowded than Għajn Tuffieħa in the summer, attracting a mix of young Maltese and tourists, and is a great place to watch the sun set or come for an evening drink; there's a café right on the sand, and a handful of kiosks selling snacks.

Restaurants

Il-Barri

Wesgħat Il-Ġublew, Mġarr ☎21/573235. Tues–Sun noon–2.30pm & 6.30–10.30pm. This informal and pleasant place is good for a quick, inexpensive burger or plate of pasta, but is best for its more substantial meat dishes (Lm1.55–Lm5): five types of steak, rabbit stewed in tomato sauce and served on spaghetti, lamb chops with mint sauce, marinated horsemeat or braġioli (steak filled with pork-mince stuffing).

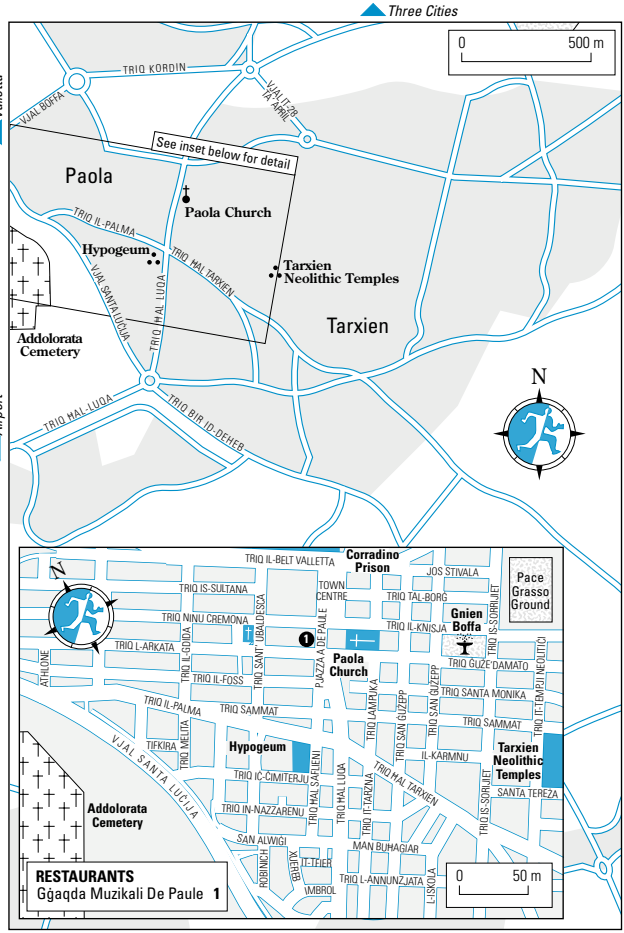
Tarxien and around

A tightly built residential town, Tarxien would be eminently missable were it not the location of the Hypogeum and Tarxien Temples. A hallucinatory underground shrine, the former is one of the world's most impressive archeological monuments. Though in an advanced state of disrepair, the colossal and enigmatic Tarxien Temples are some of the oldest man-made buildings in the world. Listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, they're an unmissable sight even to those with only a passing interest in Neolithic Malta. The area also offers more recent historical interest in the form of the Addolorata Cemetery, with its intricate tombs and ornate chapel.

Tarxien Neolithic Temples

Triq It-Tempji Neolitiċi, Tarxien ⓣ21/695578, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm1. Buses #11 from Valletta, #427 from Buġibba, or#627 from Marsaxlokk. The largest and most architecturally advanced temple complex in Malta, Tarxien's Neolithic temples were among the last batch built on the island, constructed between 3000 and 2500 BC. Evidence of fires here suggests that Bronze Age peoples used the buildings as a crematorium, but thereafter the complex lay buried under an accumulation of rubble until it was discovered by a farmer in 1914, when he investigated the large rocks that kept ruining his plough. Although in a state of semi-collapse today, you can still see the impressive bottom third of the original building which, when intact, stood some 23m high. Entry into the complex, which comprises three intermeshed temples, is through the massive trilithons of the South Temple; the first chamber holds a grand altar with spiral reliefs, and a replica of the bottom half of the "fat lady" figure found here (the original resides in Valletta's Archeology Museum; see p.54); when

▲ INNER CHAMBERS, TARXIEN TEMPLE



whole, it would have measured 2.5 metres high, making it the largest of these figures found anywhere in the world. From here, a passageway leads to the expansive Middle Temple, with its three pairs of small, symmetrical chambers. The inner two have knee-high slate-thin stone frames, smothered with spiral whorls and wedged into the passageway, and thought to mark the threshold into the temple's inner sanctum. If you look closely, you can also see faded motifs of marching bulls and goats carved on the megaliths. The Middle Temple leads to the East Temple, of which only the bottom foundation stones survive.

The Hypogeum

Triq Ic-Cimiterju, Tarxien ☎21/805019, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–4pm. Lm4. Bus #11 from Valletta, #427 from Buġibba,

Visiting the Hypogeum

As only seventy people are allowed into the Hypogeum each day to ensure its preservation, visits need to be planned well ahead – bookings are often filled solid for a couple of weeks in advance in the summer, and your only chance of getting in at the last minute is if someone cancels. You can book visits at the Hypogeum itself, and at the National Museum of Archeology in Valletta (see p.54).

or #627 from Marsaxlokk. An extensive underground shrine spread over three levels, two of which are open to the public, the Hypogeum is one of the oldest and most impressive monuments of the ancient world. Built between 3600 and 2500 BC, it was still a work in progress when Malta's Neolithic settlers disappeared without trace, and was only rediscovered in 1899. Subsequent excavations yielded the remains of 7000 bodies, as well as artefacts such as stone mallets, green stone necklaces and the famous "sleeping lady" figure (see p.24). The full purpose of the Hypogeum remains a matter of conjecture and debate; archeologists are now seeing its function as wider than that of a simple necropolis. It was certainly connected to the role of death in the larger scheme of life, perhaps even with regard to rebirth or renewal; considering the Hypogeum was in use for a thousand-odd years, the fact that only 7000 bodies have been recovered (indicating just seven burials per year) suggests that only shamans, priests or priestesses were laid here for eternal or temporary rest. Intriguingly, some rooms were designed to look like the inside chambers of temples, allowing an insight into how above-ground temples would have looked when intact. Whatever the Hypogeum's function, however, it's a unique structure with a tangible air of mystery, and you really do have to see it for yourself to appreciate the profound, sacred atmosphere created by its spatial arrangement and architectural elements. The obligatory 45-minute guided tours of the complex start with a short video; you're then taken into the first and

▼ NEOLITHIC MALLET FROM THE HYPOGEUM

Neolithic Malta

Malta's Neolithic community, which blossomed from 5000–2500 BC, was the most advanced civilization of its time: the temples, the oldest free-standing man-made structures in the world, and the relics within, more artistically sophisticated that anything else from that period, are proof of this. About twenty-five major temples have been discovered in Malta so far, and this fact has presented archeologists with one of the most intractable puzzles.

The islands are thought to have supported between 5000 and 10,000 inhabitants, and the mobilization required to build the megalithic temples would mean that many of these inhabitants had to be working on them. This seems strange and unlikely for the simple reason that the inhabitants also had to produce their food, and maintain their private dwellings. Generations of archeologists have pored over this puzzle, which is complicated by the fact that at around 2500 BC, the Neolithic community came to an inexplicable and sudden end.

The most mainstream theory is that the inhabitants over-exploited the environment, and as their natural resources dwindled, they became obsessed with fertility and religious salvation from their predicament. This led them to devote all their resources to building the temples, something that eventually led to their catastrophic end in the form of environmental collapse. Detractors of this theory argue that there is no supporting evidence whatsoever about environmental denudation, and the temple people would have documented this, or left some sign of it; by contrast, the erection of the temples is in itself a sign that the people had abundant resources – because people turn to art only once their basic food necessities are secured.

Another theory that has attracted more publicity in recent years holds that Malta at the time was much larger, and what survives is the tip of its mountain, on which most of the temples are concentrated. There is geological plausibility in this: the Pantelleria Rift, southwest of Malta, where the African and European continental plates crunch into each other, constantly produces upwarping of the land, and this could have led to a massive earthquake that destroyed the larger part of Malta, and its inhabitants. Supporting evidence for this theory is the fact that the southwest-northeast tilt of the islands is increasing, and the sheer clear-cut cliffs that girdle the entire southern coasts could only have been formed by a violent earthquake.

second levels. The jumble of ruins on the first level, hacked down long ago, highlight the intact entrance trilithon – two upright megaliths with another laid on top to make a gateway into the underground realm. The second level, daubed with representations of the spiral in red ochre (perhaps representing the Neolithic peoples' world-view cyclical continuity), has lobed chambers that served as graves, and an incomplete section that illustrates how the complex was dug out, generation after generation, by first boring holes with deer antlers, then knocking off chunks of rock between the cavities with stone mallets, and finally polishing the walls. Decorated with a painted tree thought to symbolize the tree of life, the Oracle Room takes its name from the Oracle Hole, an opening in the wall which, when spoken into, amplifies a baritone voice into an echo that booms through the complex. Beyond this lie two small interconnected chambers known as the Holy of Holies and the Main Chamber. These

▲ TARXIEN STREET SCENE

were used for ceremonies, the specifics of which are unknown.

Addolorata Cemetery

Triq Il-Labour, Marsa. Daily 7am–5pm. Free. Buses #1, #2, #4 or #6 from Valletta. Consecrated in 1869 and ranged up a hillside, Malta's largest burial ground is worth exploring for its Gothic Revival architecture and lush landscaping. From the entrance, a path meanders uphill past elaborate marble-cased tombstones overhung by cypress, olive and carob trees and Aleppo pines; the well-to-do are remembered by sumptuous Neoclassical and Baroque shrines. The Gothic Revival chapel at the top of the hill is closed to the public, but the ornate exterior is worth admiring, with a facade that tapers to a pointed pinnacle, punctuated by attractive stained-glass windows.

Restaurants

Għaqda Muzikali De Paule

Pjazza De Paule, Paola, ☎21/805431. Daily 8am–1pm, 4pm–11pm. The café of the local brass band club offers palatable meals at rock-bottom prices. You can choose from rolls with bacon. or steak and egg, simple pastas such as ravioli or lasagne, or more substantial plates of fish and chips or pork chops.

Mnajdra, Ħaġar Qim and around

Set over a rocky plateau that drops dramatically to the sea, the Neolithic temples of Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim are Malta's most evocative. The temples, alongside the beautiful surrounding landscape and the Blue Grotto caves, reached via a short boat ride from the small gorge of Wied Iż Żurrieq, attract some 100,000 visitors each year. But even in such a heavily visited area, there are still quiet, rural pockets to explore – on the outskirts of the large town of Żurrieq, the medieval chapel of Ħal Millieri boasts unique frescoes and superlative medieval architecture.

Ħal Millieri Chapel of the Annunciation

Ħal Millieri ☎21/225952. Open first Sun of every month 9am–12pm. Free. This small, cuboid stone building, erected in 1450, is one of Malta's most beautiful rural chapels. Set amid open fields, it's little visited by both Maltese and tourists alike, and this sense of isolation is part of the pleasure of visiting. Hidden behind a high perimeter wall and surrounded by a garden of cypress and palm trees, the chapel marks an apex in medieval architecture, with its pitched roof held up by interior stone arches. More interest is provided by its unique fifteenth-century frescoes of Malta's most venerated saints, painted from natural dyes. Dressed in colourful vestments and sporting ceremonial hats, they're depicted in lofty poses as if levitating, in a style that's reminiscent of Byzantine frescoes. The chapel is about a mile down the narrow pot-holed Triq L-Imqabba, which branches off northeast from Vjal Blue Grotto at a small public garden with an adjacent bus stop.

▼ FRESCOES IN HAL MILLIERI CHAPEL

Visiting the area

All the sights in this chapter are served by bus #38 from Valletta.

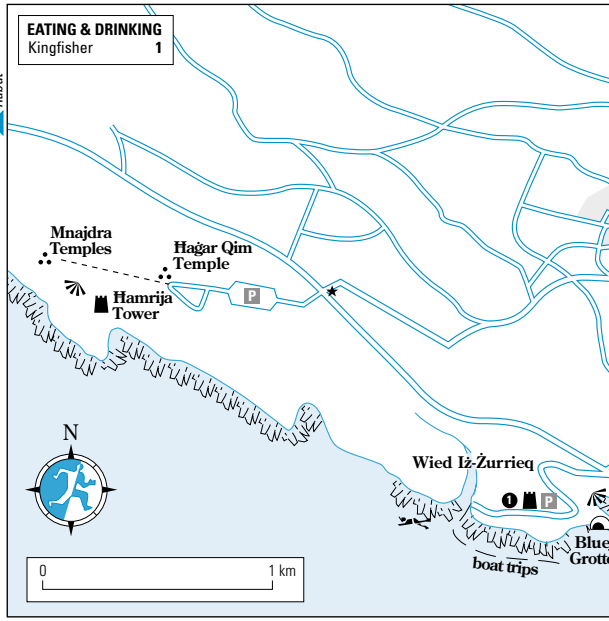
Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra Neolithic Temples

Triq Ħaġar Qim Daily 9am–5pm. www.heritagemalta.org. Lm2 per temple, or Lm3 for combined ticket.

The Ġaġar Qim and Mnajdra Neolithic temple complexes sit on a ruggedly scenic garigue plateau that falls down to the area's dramatic seacliffs – a thyme-scented, windswept open setting that's pretty much unchanged since the time when the structures were built. Built within a kilometre of each other, both were progressively constructed and used between 3600 and 2500 BC and make a stirring sight, although current plans to erect a protective ceiling shield to protect the temples from erosion is likely to impinge on the evocative setting. The least understood of all Maltese temples, Ħaġar Qim is a circular complex consisting of four temples and two opposite entrances – the one nearest the gate, through which you enter, and a back entrance along the passage that bisects the whole structure. Set on the plateau's crest, the temple is now semi-ruined, but would originally have been an imposing edifice; the heavy facade and the large upright megaliths that survive give you an idea of its former grandeur. Its design departs from the paired-apses template of Malta's other temples. The spaces and chambers open into each other in an intricate jumble of rooms, but the understanding of these spatial arrangements, and their ceremonial significance, is close to nil. Among the fertility relics unearthed here (now at the National Museum of Archeology in Valletta (see p.54) were a "fat lady" figurine and three life-size phalluses. A five-minute walk along a gently inclining path brings you to the Mnajdra complex, which consists of three temples that form a continuous concave facade – the arena-like space within is thought to have been intended as a place where the common people could congregate whilst priests or priestesses conducted ceremonies inside. The East Temple is the smallest and most primitive of the three, and only its foundations survive, while the bare Middle Temple has, uniquely, twin entrances at the front, as well as an architectural plan of its facade, carved into the left passageway megalith at the time of construction. The elegant South Temple is the best preserved of any on the Maltese islands. Its two pairs

▲ ALTAR, MNAJDRA TEMPLE

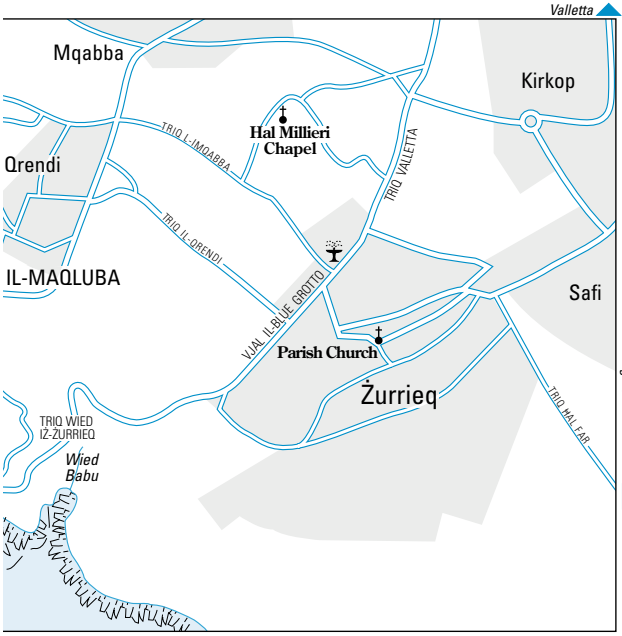
▲ HAĠAR QIM INTERIOR



of chambers, with symmetrical apses, are small and intimate; beyond them, the inner lobe and sanctum has three of its altars propped on round tapered stones. The so-called Oracle Hole, in the first chamber on the right, is a small aperture that opens into a hidden cubicle that's thought to have been the seat of a hidden oracle who perhaps passed messages or mantras, or interpreted epiphanies during ceremonies.

Wied Iż-Żurrieq and the Blue Grotto

Enclosed by a deep and dramatic gorge and lying at the mouth of a creek, the former fishing outpost of Wied Iż-Żurrieq has grown into a mini-resort, with a few restaurants and souvenir shops flanking the creek. The village's boathouses back onto a small exposed garden of wind-tufted tamarisks, which affords good sea views. The tower at the edge of the garden is one of the chain of coastal defences built by the Knights in the seventeenth century; it now houses the local police station. Some 6km offshore from the settlement is the tiny islet of Filfla, a nature reserve that's off limits to the public so as to protect its large colony of secretive storm petrel birds. There is little to keep you in Wied Iż-Żurrieq itself – most people are here to board one of the boats that ferry some 100,000 visitors each year on the fifteen-minute excursions (daily 9am–5pm; Lm2.50) to the Blue Grotto. A huge domed cave opening at sea level, it's fronted by a buttress eroded into the rocks; the sea within



has a lovely light-blue lucidity, but the tour offers only a fleeting glimpse of the cave, and the constant boat traffic detracts from the atmosphere a bit, as well as leaving an obnoxious pall of engine exhaust. If you don't fancy the boat trip, you can also see the cave by peering down the cliff where the side-road climbing from Wied Iż-Żurrieq joins the main road at the crossroads.

▼ KNIGHTS' TOWER AT WIED IŻ-ŻURRIEQ

Restaurants

Kingfisher

Wied Iż-Żurrieq ⓣ21/647908. June–Sept Tues–Sun 11am–3pm & 7–10pm; Oct–May Tues–Sun 11am–3pm, plus Sat 7–10pm.

Arguably the best of the village's half-dozen similar outfits, with a "tourist menu" of dishes such as spaghetti with octopus, shrimp omelette or roast chicken (Lm1.90–2.30) alongside more creative dishes such as pasta with Maltese cheese and sausage, stuffed quails or chicken stuffed with king prawns at around Lm3 each.

130

Marsaxlokk

Set around the deep scoop of Marsaxlokk Bay, Marsaxlokk is intimately tied with the fishing industry, and the spectacle of the town's fishermen and their colourful wooden boats remains its principal allure. The modern world is encroaching upon this traditional, close-knit community, however, by way of the power station at the bay's mouth and the apartment blocks sprouting up around town, but the wider area still offers some historical allure. To the southeast, the cave at Għar Dalam has a museum showcasing remains from prehistoric Malta, but if you simply want to get away from it all, the Delimara peninsula offers some lovely swimming.

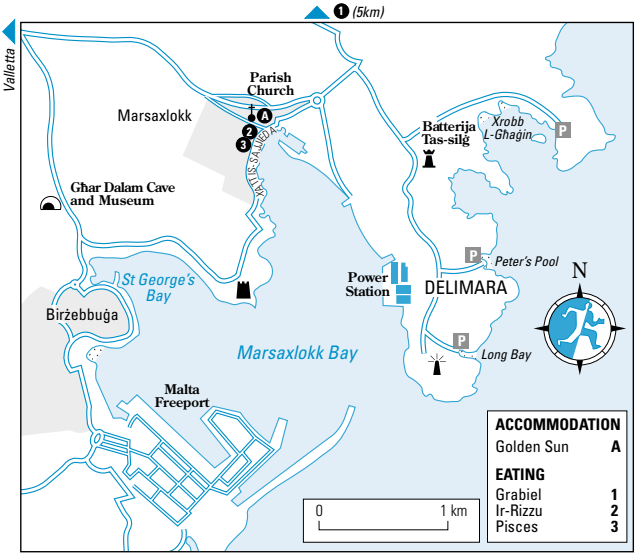
Marsaxlokk

Bus #27 from Valletta, #427 from Buġibba, or #627 from Sliema. Home port for Malta's largest fishing fleet, Marsaxlokk offers an absorbing insight into the island's traditional fishing methods, and is also a place to enjoy a delicious seafood dinner in a romantic setting by the water. The town's seafront promenade serves as its centre, with the church and small pedestrianized square set by the shore. On either side of the square lie a string of restaurants, locals' social clubs and cafés; opposite the church, hawkers sell souvenirs, clothes and fresh fish. The town's harbour is a colourful riot of *luzzu* boats – the eyes painted on their prows are supposed to lead fishermen to their catch. Demanding great skill to build, *luzzu* are more expensive now than modern fibreglass boats, but most fishermen prefer them for their sturdiness, stability and durability. Self-possessed and generally oblivious of the tourist attention they attract, the town's fishermen mend their nets and prepare their boats for fishing expeditions on the shore. In the late summer and autumn, the main catch here is the *lampuki* (dolphin fish) which migrate to the Mediterranean Sea to spawn and which, due to their local popularity, feature on Malta's coins and on the Republic of Malta coat of arms.

▼ LAMPUKI FISH

Għar Dalam Cave and museum

Triq Iż-Żejtun, Birżebbuġa ☎21/657419, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Daily 9am–5pm. Lm1. Bus #11 from Valletta. Those with a paleontological bent should enjoy perusing the collection of ancient remains displayed at the expansive 145m-deep Ghar Dalam Cave. Excavations after its discovery in 1892 yielded shreds of



pottery, rodents' teeth necklaces and other remains of Malta's first settlers; estimates as to their age range from 5000 BC to 9000 BC. Ghar Dalam also held the remains of prehistoric animals flushed into the cave at the end of the last Ice Age. Before and during the Ice Age, the level of Mediterranean Sea fluctuated from 30m and 200m lower than today, and Malta was intermittently connected to continental Europe via land bridges. Animals retreated south to escape the cold, and their carcasses drifted down ancient rivers to be deposited here – the 125,000-year-old remains unearthed include hippopotamus and dwarf elephant, as well as those of large European mammals, who found themselves marooned in Malta when the ice thawed and the sea level rose. With limited territory and food, these animals became stunted: the femurs of red deer, for example, are half the size of their European counterparts. All these relics are now exhibited in the small museum, and you can also go into the cave itself.

Delimara beaches

Enclosing Marsaxlokk Bay to the east and forming the southernmost tip of Malta, the Delimara promontory is mostly comprised of agricultural fields and bird-trapping sites among groves of Aleppo pines. The main reason to visit is the three beaches – or, more

▼ PETER'S POOL, DELIMARA

aptly, bathing holes – gouged into Delimara's southeast flank, which are popular with young Maltese during the summer and offer good snorkelling and swimming in their clear, greenish waters. Bear in mind, though, that the promontory's rocky shoreline doesn't offer very comfortable sunbathing. Working south to north, Long Bay is a small creek hemmed in by terraced cliffs, though the jagged shoreline makes it a bit tricky to get in and out of the water. Peter's Pool is similar but larger and more dramatic, with easier access to the sea; but Xrobb L-Għaġin ("Island Bay") is the most appealing, a large horseshoe-shaped cove girdled by chalky cliffs. You'll need your own transport to get to Delimara – all the bays are backed by untarmacked car parks.

Hotels

Golden Sun Aparthotel

Triq Il-Kajjik, Marsaxlokk ⓣ21/651762, ⓦ www.goldensunhotelmalta.com. Fourteen rather dull but comfortable en-suite rooms with a/c and TV (including singles and triples as well as doubles), and nine self-catering apartments, ranging from one to three bedrooms, with basic kitchens and living rooms. The hotel has a homely feel, and there's a small swimming pool. Doubles (breakfast included) and one-bedroom apartments from Lm17.

Restaurants

Grabiel

Pjazza Mifsud Bonnici, Marsascala ⓣ21/634194. Mon 7–10pm, Tues–Sat noon–2pm & 7–10pm. Celebrated among an upmarket clientele for its consistently high-quality seafood, and offering a great selection of daily specials. The *fritto mesto* – a seafood feast of octopus, squid, prawns, clams, king prawns, calamari rings and baby calamari, some deep fried and others steamed in wine, garlic and brandy – is great to share. Main courses are around Lm6.

Pisces

89 Xatt Is-Sajjieda, Marsaxlokk ⓣ21/654956. Tues–Sun 11am–10.30pm. Italian-style steaks and pastas alongside a bigger selection of fish dishes prepared in traditional Italian and Maltese styles (all around Lm4). The indoor dining room is rather garishly decorated – in warm weather, the tables outdoors at the waters' edge are a much nicer choice.

Ir-Rizzu

49 Xatt Is-Sajjieda, Marsaxlokk ⓣ21/651569. Daily 11.30am–2.30pm & 6.30–10.30pm. The largest and most creative of Marsaxlokk's clutch of seafront restaurants, doing brisk business in a lobby-like room decorated in white and cream. The extensive menu consists mostly of seafood dishes, all prepared in creative Italian ways. Mains range from Lm3.85 to Lm5.65.

▼ *IR-RIZZU*

Gozo: Rabat and the south coast

The south of the island is Gozo's most developed region, home to the pleasant capital of Rabat, overshadowed by its seventeenth-century castle and with an old quarter that holds a plethora of historical sights. The urban conurbation spills over to Xewkija, where the massive parish church provides a passing diversion on the way to Mġarr Ix-Xini, a peaceful undeveloped gorge. The sheer seacliffs south of here are particularly spectacular around Xlendi, Gozo's second-largest seaside resort. The gateway to Gozo, Mġarr harbour is a picturesque inlet with plenty of appealing places to have a seafood dinner or a drink by the sea.

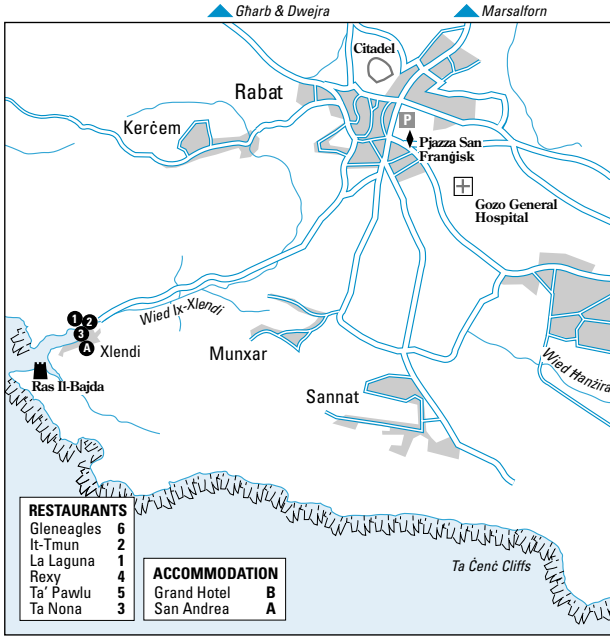
Rabat

Though the shops and theatres along the main street of Triq-Ir Republikka offer plenty of absorbing urban bustle, it's Rabat's quaint old town that begs for exploration, its maze of alleys overhung by Baroque townhouses with handsome old doors, elaborately carved stone balconies and niches containing Catholic icons. And despite the density of its buildings, the old quarter remains quiet and traffic-free. Its northern extremity is Pjazza Indipendenza, a pedestrianized square laid out in front of the Banca Giuratale, an attractive circular Baroque building from 1733 that holds the town hall. There's a morning tourist market in the square selling souvenirs and clothes, as well as plenty of cafés with outdoor tables from where you can soak up the scene. From the square, wander south to St George's Basilica (daily 7am–noon & 5–7pm; free), the most sumptuously Baroque of

Visiting Gozo

Ferries between Ċirkewwa in Malta and Mġarr Harbour in Gozo are the main link between the islands. Operating from 6am to 1am between October and June, and 24 hours in July and August, ferries normally run every 45 minutes during the day, and every two hours in the evenings or night; journey time is 25 minutes. Foot-passenger tickets cost Lm2 return, and Lm6.25 for car and driver; for schedules and more information, call ☎21/561622 or ☎21/556114, or visit 🌐www.gozochannel.com.

In terms of public transport, Gozo's bus station on Triq Putirjal in Rabat is served by eight routes that make return trips to all of Gozo's towns; in summer, the routes are expanded to cover Dwejra, Xlendi and Ramla Bay. Of the eight services, the #25 to Mġarr Harbour runs ever 30min; the rest run only every hour or so, and stop in the afternoons between noon and 4pm. For up to date information on schedules, call ☎21/559344 or ☎21/559345.

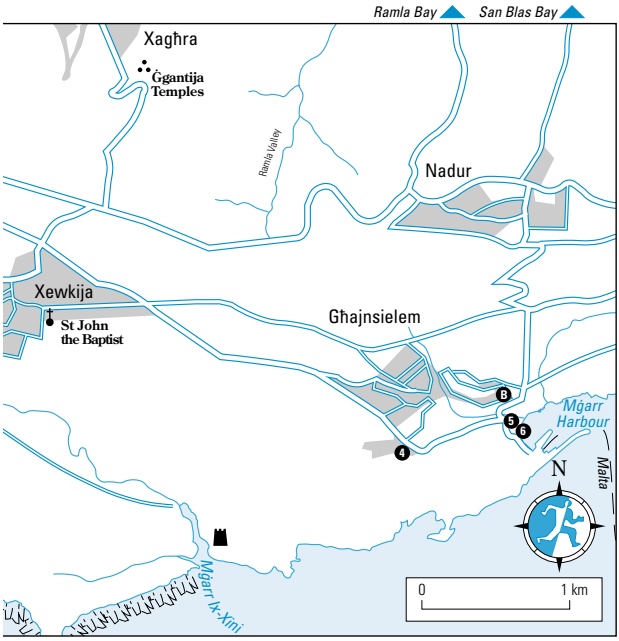


Gozo's churches. Built between 1672 and 1778, and tinkered with over the years, it boasts an ornate exterior and an equally opulent interior, plastered in marble and with a grand canopied altar. St George appears in several notable artworks – look for Mattia Preti's painting on the left-hand side of the nave, Stefano Erardi's altarpiece, and two paintings by Francesco Zahra in the chancel. A short walk southeast, the delightful Pjazza San Frangisk is Rabat's largest plaza, and a pleasant place to relax at a café table under the shade of ficus trees.

▼ BANCA GIURUTALE, RABAT

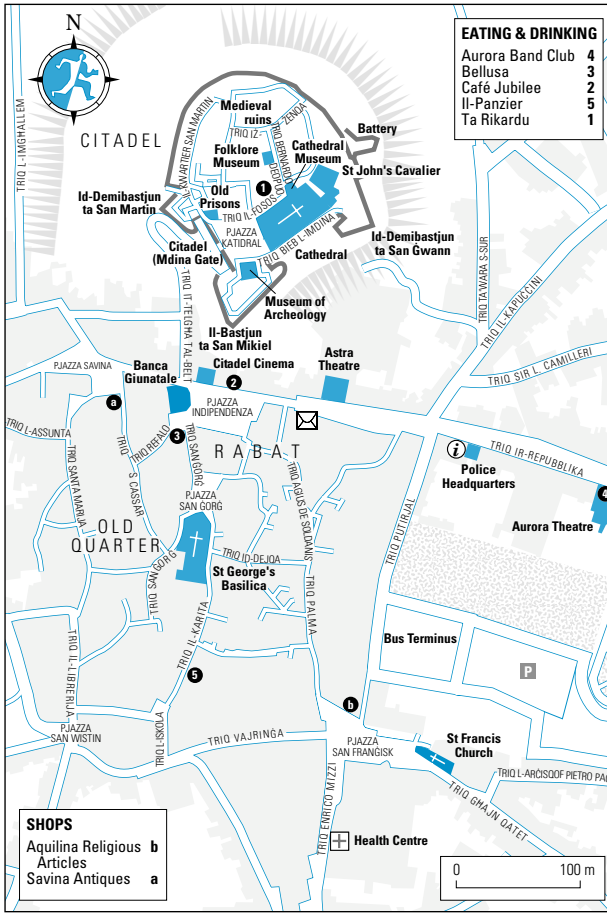
The Citadel

Home to Gozo's most significant historical sights, the Citadel was built during Roman rule, but was later destroyed and rebuilt twice. Its walls were last breached in 1551 by the Muslim corsair Dragut Rias, who dragged virtually the entire population into slavery – an event that prompted the rebuilding in the seventeenth century. Though it's less than 200m long by 200m wide, you'll need a few hours to fully appreciate its medieval ambience as well as take in its clutch of museums, and walk around the perimeter fortifications to admire the panoramic views – the Citadel is Gozo's



second highest point. The first building you'll see once you've passed through the Citadel's gates is the Gozo cathedral (daily 9am–4.30pm; Lm0.25), designed by the celebrated Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafa and built between 1697 and 1711. Gafa achieved the difficult task of evoking grandness in a restricted space by raising the structure on a podium fronted by a wide flight of stairs. Its interior is worth a peek for its spectacular trompe l'oeil painting of a false dome. The other focus of a wander around the Citadel is its museums, only three of which are worth checking out. While the collection of traditional tools, from farming implements to lace-weaving equipment isn't anything to shout about, the Folklore Museum is worth a stop to take in the building in which it's set, a beautiful Siculo-Norman house displaying characteristic two-light windows. A repository of well-labelled archeological relics discovered in Gozo, spanning all periods from the Neolithic to the Arabic era, the Museum of Archeology would be missable were it not for two outstanding relics: an ancient skeleton buried in an urn during Phoenician times and, from the Arabic

▼ CITADEL, RABAT



epoch, a tombstone with a long and fascinating dedication. The Old Prisons, built in the early seventeenth century, hold an illuminating exhibition on the Knights' military architecture in Gozo; you can make out graffiti left by former prisoners in the cells, such as the outline of a palm (a form of signature)

Visiting the Citadel's museums

The citadel museums detailed in this chapter are open daily from 9am to 5pm; you can pay Lm1 to visit them individually, or Lm2 for a block ticket that covers them all. For more information on their collection, visit www.heritagemalta.org.

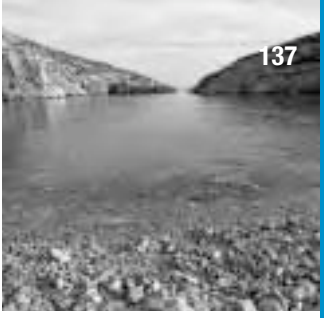
and ships – each mast marks a year of sentence served.

Xewkija

Bus #42 & #43 from Rabat. A quiet town of empty, shaded streets, with a central old quarter of characterful townhouses with lovely Baroque balconies, the main reason to visit Xewkija is to see the massive St John the Baptist Church on Pjazza San Ġwann Battista (daily 6am–noon & 4–7pm; free), whose dome is visible from all over Gozo. The Baroque design – a circular floor plan tapering upwards towards the dome, framed by a bell tower detached from the main structure – is by the Italian Giuseppe Damato. Its dimensions are impressive: supported by eight internal pillars, the dome is the tallest in Malta, while the building's internal volume is only slightly smaller than St Peter's Cathedral in Rome. It's an awe-inspiring structure which prompts contemplation of the faith and pride that motivated parishioners to endure the hardship of building it; it took them from 1951 to the early 1990s to complete it, and much of the stone used in the construction was hauled up by hand and in donkey carts.

Wied Ħanżira and Mġarr Ix-Xini

The signposted road from Xewkija to Mġarr Ix-Xini meanders past farms along the south flank of the dramatic Wied Ħanżira, a gorge cut into the bedrock by an long-gone river. The valley deepens as it gets closer to the coast, and then disappears under the sea at Mġarr Ix-Xini, a tranquil fjord fronted by a small patch of sandy shore, where the transparent



▲ MĠARR IX-XINI

water beckons you in for a dip. Mġarr Ix-Xini translates as "the harbour of the galleys", harking back to the time when it provided a secluded anchorage for corsairs' frequent raids on Gozo. At the mouth of the bay lie the crumbling remains of a coastal watchtower built by the Knights in 1658, whose construction effectively deterred the activities of the marauders. There's no public transport connection, and if you're not driving, Mġarr Ix-Xini is a pleasant half-hour walk from Xewkija. The country road peters out at the bottom of the fjord, where there's a tiny car park.

Ta Ċenċ Cliffs

Bus #50 & #51 from Rabat. Just outside the nondescript town of Sannat, the land falls sharply into the sea at well-signposted Ta Ċenċ, a dramatic and dizzying 150-metre drop. With lovely sea views, it's a very scenic spot for a walk, and the rocky garigue habitat supports some interesting local fauna and flora. Clumps of endemic rock centuary – Malta's national plant, with small, succulent leaves and fluffy mauve flowers in summer – cling to the cliff edge, and the area is a favoured haunt of the blue rock thrush, the national bird, easily identifiable by its melodious warble, dark brown or blue plumage and habit of flicking its tailfeathers up and

down. Ta' Ċenċ is best known, however, for the 10,000-odd Cory's shearwaters which nest in crags on the cliff face, one of the largest colonies in the Mediterranean. You're unlikely to catch a glimpse of their dark, smoky plumage, as they return to land only at night during the May–August nesting season, but you might hear the melancholy din of their collective mewling calls.

Xlendi

Bus #87 June–Oct only. At the mouth of the Xlendi Valley, which winds down scenically from the environs of Rabat, Xlendi is Gozo's second largest seaside resort. Laid around cliff-lined Xlendi Bay, the dense fabric of high-rise hotels and apartment blocks lend a claustrophobic feel and have largely ruined Xlendi's former natural beauty. It's still dramatic and scenic nonetheless, its waterfront lined by cafés and restaurants, and makes a delightful place to have dinner or a late stroll down the promenade. On summer evenings, you can walk towards the left flank of the bay to hear the plaintive calls of the Cory's shearwaters which nest in the cliffs. In the daytime, it's well worth renting a canoe from operators along the promenade (Lm2 per hour), and paddling out into the bay to take in the monumental sweep of cliffs which until recently were a favoured spot for the area's so-called "climbing fishermen", who inched down the cliff-face to a ledge near the bottom to fish in the deep waters. Though it's crowded with swimmers in summer, Xlendi's bay isn't an especially appealing place to go for a dip; instead, head towards the hunchbacked Ras Il-Bajda promontory on the southeast reaches of the bay, a fifteen-minute walk from the centre of Xlendi along the coastal footpath. Affording more good cliff views, the route passes another of the Knights' defence towers, but most people come to swim. Beyond the tower, a curiously eroded globigerina-limestone plateau tilts towards the waterline. The water here reaches a depth of 40m, yet the rockface that slopes sharply underwater teems with fish and offers excellent snorkelling – look out for starfish, octopus and sea urchins.

Hotels

Grand Hotel

Mġarr ☎21/563840, ⓦwww.grandhotelmalta.com. Imposing hybrid of Baroque and Neoclassical design overlooking Mġarr Harbour. The pleasant, spacious en-suite rooms have a/c, phone and TV; those with sea views are

▼ PJAZZA SAN FRANĠISK, RABAT

more expensive. Doubles Lm27, breakfast included.

San Andrea

St Simon Street, Xlendi ☎21/565555, ⓦwww.hotelsanandrea.com. New property on the promenade, with 28 tastefully decorated en-suite rooms with a/c, balconies, Internet access, phone and TV. Doubles Lm30, breakfast included.

Shops

Savina Antiques

Pjazza Savina, Rabat. Daily 7am–3pm. A large assortment of relatively inexpensive antique bric-a-brac arrayed on the pavement, mostly traditional Maltese brassware.

Aquilina Religious Articles

10 Pjazza San Frangisk, Rabat ☎21/561958. Mon–Fri 8.30am–noon & 5–7pm, Sat 8.30am–noon. The Catholic icons and statues, as well as *pasturi* (traditional Maltese figurines) that clutter this shop make authentic and unusual souvenirs.

Cafés

Aurora Band Club

Triq Ir-Repubblika, Rabat. Daily 8am–11pm. Large café that serves inexpensive coffees and drinks, and fast food such as burgers, *pastizzi* and pizza, as well as English breakfasts. There are also snooker tables and Internet access.

Bellusa

34 Pjazza Indipendenza, Rabat ☎21/556243. Daily 7am–9pm. Good coffee, as well as *pastizzi*, pizza and other meals and snacks, served outdoors in the atmospheric Pjazza Indipendenza by the attentive and chatty proprietors.

▲ *IL-BELLUSA*, RABAT

Café Jubilee

Pjazza Indipendenza, Rabat ☎21/558921. Daily 8am–1am. A café-bar that attracts regulars for its coffee and daytime snacks, and becomes a fully fledged bar in the evenings that's particularly busy in the winter.

Restaurants

Il-Panzier

Triq Il-Karita, Rabat ☎21/559979. Daily noon–2.30pm & 7–10pm; closed last three weeks in Dec. Malta's best Sicilian food, served in a covered courtyard in Rabat's old town. House specialities such as Pork Al Vulcano (minced pork and herbs grilled or baked between lemon leaves) are particularly good. Around Lm5 for main courses.

Ta Rikardu

4 Triq Il-Fosos, Rabat ☎21/555953. Daily 10am–6pm. Rustic, home-made Gozitan antipasti platters of Maltese sausage, ġbejniet sheep's cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, olives, capers, tomatoes and onions cost Lm3 for two, and there's good home-made wine at Lm2.50 per bottle.

It-Tmun

3 Triq Mount Carmel, Xlendi ⓣ21/551571. March–Oct Mon & Wed–Sun noon–2pm & 6–10pm; Nov–Feb Fri–Sun same hours. Gozo's best fusion cuisine, with a constantly changing menu and an impressive wine list. Traditional seafood platters sit alongside more avant-garde dishes such as goats' cheese and caramelized shallot tart, and grilled quail in coconut Thai curry. Main courses for about Lm6.

▲ *LA LAGUNA*, XLENDI

La Laguna

Triq Sant' Andrija, Xlendi ⓣ21/559372. March–Oct Mon & Wed–Sun 11am–2pm, & 6–10.30pm; Nov–Feb Thurs–Sun same hours. This unassuming, friendly and cheerful little place, with outdoor tables in summer, offers a standard but proficiently prepared Italian menu. The emphasis is on fish, both in starters such as the light smoked salmon in mayonnaise, and main courses such as stewed calamari stuffed with fish, or a mixed grill of fresh seasonal fish. Mains are around Lm5.

Rexy

100 Mġarr Road, Għajnsielem ⓣ21/560873. Daily 11am–2pm & 6–10.30pm. Situated on the main road to Mġarr Harbour and popular with local families, offering large portions of reliable, inexpensive food in a somewhat bland setting. You can fill up on one of the thirteen classic pasta dishes for Lm1.50, or a large pizza for under Lm2, while more substantial main courses such as steak or roast chicken are under Lm5.

Ta' Pawlu

4 Triq Manoel de Vilhena, Mġarr Harbour ⓣ21/558355. Wed–Sun & Mon 6.30–10pm, plus Nov–May Sun noon–2pm. A cosy little restaurant decorated in warm colours, with outdoor seating on a terrace overlooking a quaint former boatyard. The menu features standards such as traditional fish soup, and more original main courses – try steak grilled on lava rocks, crepes stuffed with chicken, mushrooms, carrots and mild curry sauce, or chicken breast in a creamy prune sauce. Lm6 for main courses.

Bars

Gleneagles

10 Victory St, Mġarr Harbour. Daily noon–1am. Opened in 1885, this former fishermen's watering hole, decorated with nautical curios, caters for middle-class regulars as well as fishermen. The tables set on the balcony afford good views of the quaint and colourful harbour.

Ta Nona

Xatt Ix-Xlendi, Xlendi ⓣ21/550869. June–Sept daily 10am–4am; Oct–May 10am–4pm & 8pm–1am. This small bar, with curio prints cluttering its stone walls and tables on the promenade, makes a sunny spot for afternoon teas and coffees and a bit of people-watching.

Northeast Gozo

Most visitors to Gozo spend the majority of their time in the northern portion of the island. Although it's Gozo's busiest region, a laid-back feel remains: the wide, quiet streets bask in the sunshine, and even at the height of the summer, the volume of tourists only amounts to a trickle at the compact resort of Marsalforn. The bulk of Gozo's accommodation is located here, and the town makes a great base from which to strike out to the lovely beaches at Ramla Bay, or check out the area's various historical sights, the most impressive of which are the incredible Ġgantija Temples, Malta's oldest Neolithic temples.

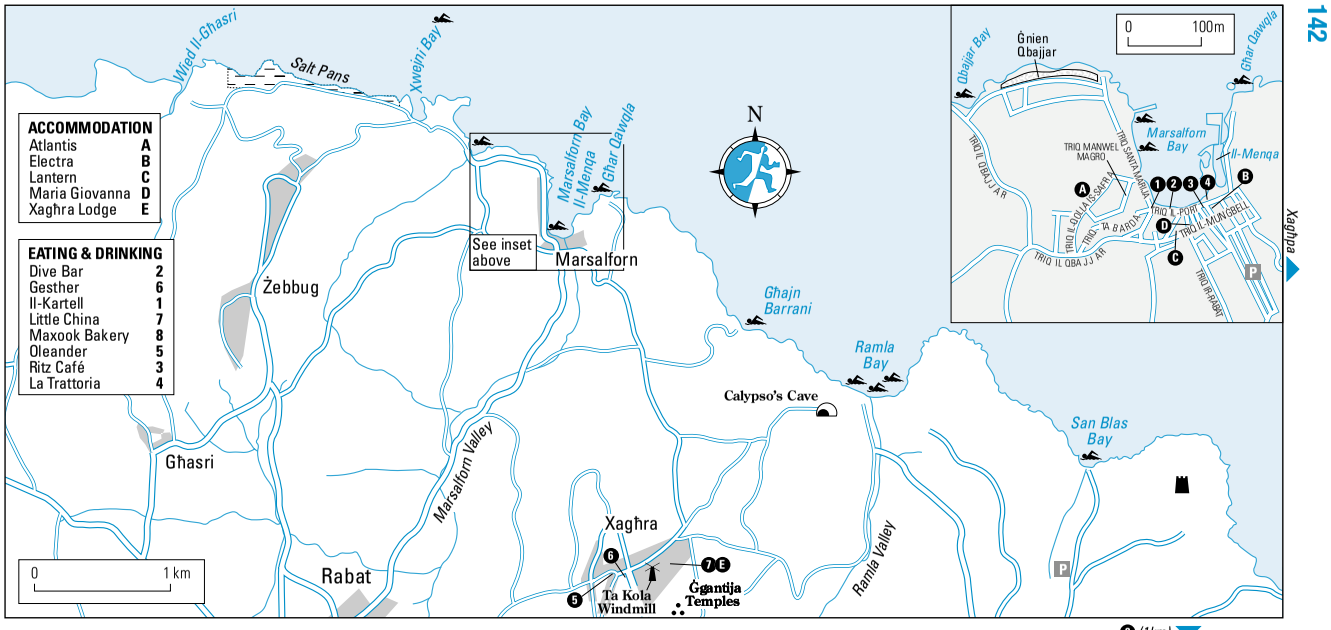
Marsalforn

Bus #21 from Rabat. With a ribbon of apartment blocks and hotels spreading around an open bay, Marsalforn is Gozo's largest seaside resort. The low density of the development here has ensured an airy, gentle feel, and it's a fairly quiet place that only picks up on summer evenings, when the promenade fills up with strollers and the seafront restaurants do brisk business. There's a tiny sandy beach at the inner mouth of the bay, but it's rather exposed to passers-by and the seabed is rocky, so most locals prefer to swim off the rocks that trace the waterline along the west side of the bay, where the promenade gives way to the rocky shoreline (there are ladders to enable you to get in and out). There's more good swimming to be had five minutes' walk west of town at Ghar Qawqla, where you can jump in from a limestone plateau; stairs lead to the water, and there are sun-loungers for rent. A small breakwater-enclosed harbour on the east flank of Marsalforn Bay, Il-Menqa is the docking station of several brightly painted *luzzu* fishing boats. During the *lampuki* season (late Aug to Oct), the area jostles with locals waiting for the fishermen to return and unload their catches, which are sold on the spot – it's a vivid scene, with sales pitches wafting through the air alongside the smell of freshly caught fish.

Xwejni saltpans

No public transport. Hundreds of depressions gouged into the soft

▲ GOZO BOAT TOURS


ACCOMMODATION
Atlantis A
Electra B
Lantern C
Maria Giovanna D
Xagħra Lodge E
EATING & DRINKING
Dive Bar 2
Gesther 6
Il-Kartell 1
Little China 7
Maxook Bakery 8
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La Trattoria 4
Wied Il-Għasri
Salt Pans
Xwejni Bay
Marsalforn Bay
Il-Menqa
Għar Qawqla
See inset above
Marsalforn
Żebbug
Għajn Barrani
Ramla Bay
Calypso's Cave
San Blas Bay
Għasri
Marsalforn Valley
Xagħra
Rabat
Ta Kola Windmill
Ġgantija Temples
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Għar Qawqla
Marsalforn Bay
Il-Menqa
TRIQ MANWEL MAGRO
TRIQ SANTA MARGLA
TRIQ IL-QOLLA S-SAFRA
TRIQ IL-PORT
TRIQ IL-MUNGIBELL
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P
Xagħra
8 (1km)

yellow globigerina limestone, Gozo's saltpans form an intricate web of abstract patterns, and take up a fairly sizeable stretch of coastline, some 2km long by 50m wide. During the winter, heavy waves splatter seawater over the rocks to fill the pans; this evaporates during the calm of the summer, leaving crusts of crystal salt. If you visit in August, you'll see gangs of workers shovelling the salt into bags; the uncrushed crystals are sold in most local supermarkets. Despite the commercial slant, the pans are quite beautiful, particularly during the winter, when the reflection of the sky in the pan-water makes the pans like a field of mirrors.

Wied Il-Għasri

No public transport. A deep, snaking gorge some 300m long with a creek at the bottom, Wied Il-Għasri is reachable via the right fork of the road directly below the Ġordan Lighthouse (see p.149). The only human intervention here is the flight of stairs pickaxed into the side of the cliff to provide access to the inner mouth of the creek, where a tiny pebbly shore gives way to the narrow body of water whose colour ranges from green to deep blue. This is an excellent spot for snorkelling; look out for stingrays, deep-water fish and some curious underwater topography towards the outer reaches of the creek.

Xaġħra

Buses #64 and #65 from Rabat.

Sprawling over a series of ridges and bluffs, Xaġħra is one of Gozo's largest towns. It's a busy place, with an attractive and lively town square, Pjazza Vittorja. Encircled by oleander trees and home to handsome Baroque

▲ XAĠHRA TOWN SQUARE

townhouses, its old colonial-era bars sit alongside modern restaurants. At the head of the square is the parish church, with its ornate bell towers and dome; it was designed by Maltese priest Karlu Żimech, and built in the mid-eighteenth century. Its marble-panelled interior (daily 6–10am & 5–7pm; free) holds some good paintings and an exquisite organ.

Ġgantija Temples

Triq L-Imqades, Xaġħra. Daily 9am–5pm ☎21/553194, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Lm1.50. Buses #64 & #65 from Rabat. Of all the Neolithic temples in the Maltese islands, the two at Ġgantija are the most impressive; constructed in around 3600 BC, they're also the oldest freestanding man-made structures in the world. The site was originally excavated in 1827, and although erosion has since taken a heavy toll (some sections teeter dangerously close to collapse), the temple remains outstanding, its massive walls projecting high above the bluff on which they're situated. The circular complex is comprised of the North and South temples, which share one perimeter wall, and save for its altars and passageway megaliths, Ġgantija is built entirely from upper coralline limestone; its largest megalith, weighing 55

tonnes, is as large as a pick-up truck. The inner shrines of the five-apsed North Temple hold the crumbling remains of simple altars: flat slabs of rock resting on two upright stones. The South Temple is markedly larger, its arrangement more sophisticated and its five apses more protracted. A series of bowls cut into the rocks immediately behind the entrance suggest some sort of purification ritual before entry into the temple, while the first apse on the right holds various pieces of stone, carved with eroded spiral motifs, which are arranged in a spatial configuration that obviously had some divine or ceremonial significance. Also lining the passageways are libation holes that are thought to have been used to drain blood from sacrificed animals, perhaps an offering to the earth. In the second chamber, the three altars in the apse to the left survive virtually intact.

Ta Kola Windmill

Triq Il-Mithna, Xaghra. Daily 9am–5pm ⓣ21/561071, ⓦwww.heritagemalta.org. Lm1. Buses #64 & #65 from Rabat. Now opened up as a tourist attraction, having ceased commercial wheat-grinding at the beginning of the twentieth century, this attractive two-storey windmill topped by its circular sail-tower was built in 1725. It's worth a visit to see the still-functioning original wheat-grinding apparatus, an intriguing piece of engineering fashioned (except for the huge grinding stones) entirely out of timber. Upstairs, you can peruse the re-created millers' living quarters: stark dining and living rooms, two bedrooms and kitchen decked out with a traditional *kenur*, a stone hearth used for stewing.

▼ TA KOLA WINDMILL

Calypso's Cave

Buses #64 & #65 from Rabat. Perched on a bluff above the sea, Calypso's Cave is misleadingly touted as the legendary grotto inhabited by the nymph Ogygia in Homer's Odyssey, where she kept Odysseus captive of her love for seven years. Its true location is actually in an inaccessible valley at Mellieha in Malta, and it's unclear how Gozo's cavern requisitioned the title – perhaps because of the marvellous view here, which is the main reason to visit. It's a gorgeous scene of clay slopes tumbling down to the orange sand of Ramla Bay, and rolling inland into Ramla Valley – you can pick out the town of Nadur on a ledge at the valley's far side. Formed by fissures in the rock surface, the dark and claustrophobic cave is not worth the effort of climbing into, though you might want to sample the sweet and succulent but pip-filled prickly pear fruit sold near the entrance in summer.

Ramla Bay

Bus #42 from Rabat, July–Sept only. Enclosed by twin headlands, Ramla Bay is among the most stunning beaches in the Mediterranean, and gets pretty

crowded during the summer as a result. It has a sweep of clear shallow sea, and its lurid, orange-coloured sand covers a 500m stretch of shoreline, giving way to undulating sand dunes at the back; along its sides, the bay steps up in terraced fields interspersed by thick meadows of wild bamboo whipped into elegant ripples by the sea breezes. Ramla Bay's beauty is very fragile, however, and the sand dunes, characterized by sparse vegetation and bound by tamarisk trees, represent the only surviving stretch in the Maltese islands and harbour rare and fragile plants and insects – avoid lying on the sand dunes, let alone camping or having a barbecue. A couple of kiosks adjacent to the car park serve drinks and snacks, and rent out umbrellas and deckchairs.

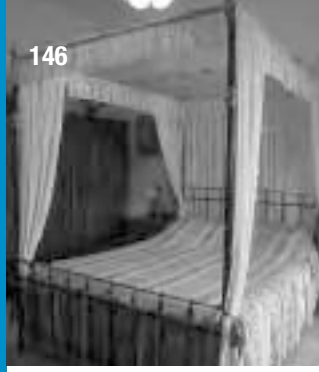
Għajn Barrani

No public transport. The scenic cove of Għajn Barrani boasts attractive greenish-blue water backed by steep slopes and cliffs. The shore is comprised of a plateau of hard-packed clay, while large rocky boulders string the coast, but because it's hard to find and access is poor, it's usually deserted. Legend has it that Muslim corsairs used to shelter here and collect water from the spring that trickles down the beach, hence the name Għajn Barrani or "foreigner's spring". The water is clear and inviting, and favoured by nude bathers – note, however, that flashers have been reported here; they're more of a nuisance than anything else, but you may want to visit in a group. To get to Għajn Barrani, you'll need to get onto the road that runs between Xagħra and Marsalforn; from here, around 2km northwest of Xagħra, a farmer's dirt road branches off to the east near a roundabout with a well in its centre. Follow the dirt road until it peters out, after which you'll have to walk the final ten-minute stretch down to the sea.

San Blas Bay

Buses #42 & #43 from Ramla Bay to Nadur. A small, sandy beach with bright orange sand, San Blas is cut among bluffs of rocky cliffs and sits at the bottom of a verdant valley known for its citrus groves, which are screened by bamboo hedges to protect them from wind and sea-spray. A relatively quiet spot with inviting water, San Blas has been left in its pristine natural state, and there are no facilities. It's a lovely spot to relax on the sand, with the vast sky and open water stretching out ahead of you. If you're driving, you can follow the signs to San Blas from Nadur's church square; otherwise, you'll have to make the 4km journey on foot. The road is marked all the way, and the last leg is via a steep farmers' road; the small clearing here fills up quickly with cars – your best bet is to park near the last of the houses before the start of the concrete access road.

▼ SAN BLAS VALLEY



▲ *XAĠHRA LODGE* HOTEL

Hotels

Atlantis Hotel

Triq Il-Qolla Is-Safra, Marsalforn ☎21/554685, 🌐www.atlantisgozo.com. Family-run hotel just up the coast from the Marsalforn seafront. The clean and bright en-suite rooms have a/c, phones and TVs, and facilities include a sauna, gym, squash courts and Internet access. Doubles Lm29, breakfast included.

Guesthouses

Electra

Triq Il-Wied, Marsalforn ☎21/556196. Marsalforn's budget option, this basic family-run property has fifteen plain doubles with en-suite bathrooms, and some single rooms, with shared bathrooms and balconies that overlook the bay. Doubles Lm12, breakfast included.

Lantern

Triq Il-Mungbell, Marsalforn ☎21/562365, ℗21/556285. Twelve en-suite rooms (including some triples), with plain furniture, TVs and a/c, situated just off the waterfront. Doubles Lm13, breakfast included.

Maria Giovanna

41 Triq Ir-Rabat, Marsalforn ☎21/553630, 🌐www.tamariagozo.com. Five large rooms, two en-suite, nicely decorated with old-style furniture. The price is unbeatable for this standard of accommodation – book in advance in the high season. Doubles Lm16, breakfast included.

Bed and breakfasts

Xagħra Lodge

Triq Dun Ġorġ Preca, Xagħra ☎21/562362, ✉xaghralodge@waldonet.net.mt. Run by British expats and discreetly located in residential Xagħra, the house is decorated with mahogany furniture, electric chandeliers and elaborate curtains. The lush en-suite, a/c rooms include family and honeymoon rooms, the latter with an attractive four-poster bed. Common facilities include a small pool and a good Chinese restaurant. Doubles Lm25, breakfast included.

Cafés

Ritz Café

Triq Il-Wied, Marsalforn. Daily 10am–3am. Long-established place with outdoor seating on the waterfront, serving coffees and snacks. It becomes more of a bar in the evenings, when the regulars play table games or watch TV.

Restaurants

Gesther

Triq Tmienja Ta' Settembru, Xagħra ☎21/556621. Mon–Sat noon–2.30pm. Small, unassuming eatery excelling in Gozitan home-cooking. The simply prepared dishes – marrow soup, roast lamb, stuffed chicken breast and broad bean and goat's cheese pie – are

wholesome and tasty. By far the best food in Malta in this price range (around Lm3 for mains).

Il-Kartell

Triq Marina, Marsalforn ☎21/556918. June–Sept daily noon–3.30pm & 6–11pm, closed Wed lunch; Oct–May Mon–Tues & Thurs–Sun noon–3.30pm & 6–10.30pm. Call ahead to check winter opening hours. One of Marsalforn's best restaurants, with tables at the water's edge and a menu of traditional Gozitan dishes – the stuffed marrow is particularly good, as are pastas such as penne with local sausage, sundried tomatoes and garlic. About Lm5 for main courses.

La Trattoria

Triq Il-Port, Marsalforn ☎21/556800, June–Oct daily 6–10.30pm; Nov–Dec & Feb–March Fri–Sun & Mon–Tues 6–10.30pm; winter opening subject to change, call in advance. Excellent traditional Maltese dishes such as rabbit, ravioli and *bragioli* alongside grilled calamari with olive oil, lemon and vinegar, or grilled chicken breast with a piquant sauce; plenty of meat dishes, including top-grade American steak. Lm5 for main courses.

Little China

Triq Dun Ġorġ Preca, Xagħra ☎21/562362. Mon & Wed–Sun 7–11pm. Pinkish tablecloths and blood-red flock wallpaper set an expansive mood in this pleasant mid-priced hideaway. The menu is tasty and extensive (there's even crispy quail and rabbit), service is friendly, and the good house wine is a bargain at Lm2.25. Saturday nights see a poolside buffet, with DJ.

Maxook Bakery

21 Triq San Ġakbu, Nadur, ☎21/550014. Mon–Sat 8am–8pm, Sun noon–8pm. The only bakery in the islands that still makes pizzas in a wood-fired oven. Toppings are either anchovies (or tuna) and potatoes, tomatoes and herbs; they also do a calzone stuffed with goat's cheese and potatoes. Tasty and filling, they're Lm1.30 each. Order in advance – preferably the day before, and at least two hours before pick-up.

Oleander

10 Pjazza Vittorja, Xagħra ☎21/557230. Tues–Sun 11.30am–3pm & 7–10pm. This romantic place has gone from strength to strength, and offers locally inspired dishes such as rabbit, ravioli and fish soup, and other simple delights such as quails with aromatic olive oil, roast lamb, and mixed grill of fillet steak, lamb and quail. About Lm5 for main courses.

Bars

Dive Bar

Triq Il-Port, Marsalforn ☎21/559931. May–Oct 8.30pm–4am; Nov–April Fri–Sun 8.30pm–3pm. A friendly bar whose interior mimics that of a submersible, and tends to attract late-night crowds; music ranges from pop to garage to hard house.

▼ MARSALFORN RESTAURANTS

Western Gozo

Western Gozo is far less built up than the south. The towns are small and the topography more hilly and undulating, comprised largely of cultivated land, and even in the sleepy towns, you'll still encounter the occasional farmer trundling produce home on a mule-driven cart or herding flocks of sheep and goats through the streets. Nightlife is virtually nonexistent and there are few restaurants, but such tranquillity has not gone unnoticed, with many wealthy Maltese buying holiday homes here. It's a relaxed area to explore, though, and its few notable sights, though scattered, can all be seen in a day.

Ta' Pinu Basilica

☎21/556187. Bus #91 from Rabat. Daily 7am–12.30pm & 1.30–7pm. Free. The imposing Ta' Pinu Basilica is prominently located in the midst of open countryside. A chapel has existed on this site since the medieval era; by 1575, it had fallen into disrepair and was marked for demolition, but the worker who struck the first sledgehammer blow apparently broke his arm – a sign interpreted as divine intervention, and which led to the chapel being spared. In 1883, Ta' Pinu gained notoriety when a local fieldworker, Karmela Grima, heard a disembodied voice summoning her to the chapel, where it instructed her to "recite three Hail Mary's in honour of the three days my body was confined to the tomb". Grima's story spread like wildfire, and islanders started making pilgrimages to the chapel. The present church was built between 1920 and 1932 to accommodate the

▲ TA' PINU BASILICA

ever-increasing number of pilgrims, who still flock here today. The Romanesque church is designed on the standard Latin cross outline, with a separate bell tower, while its interior is packed with ornate stone sculptures. The original medieval chapel is at the back of the present church, reached through corridors on either side of the altar which are cluttered with votive offerings left by those allegedly healed by the Madonna's miracles. The compact chapel has whitewashed walls and a simple but moving altarpiece painted by the Italian artist Amadeo Perugino, depicting eight angels crowning the Madonna in heaven. Opposite the church, the stations of the cross have been re-created in a route up the Ta Ghammar hill, represented by life-size marble statues. The view from the top of the hill, which takes in northwest Gozo's motley sweep of fields and compact towns, is worth the walk.

Ġordan Hill

Bus #91 from Rabat. A signposted country road winding through the fringes of the town of Ghasri leads to the table-top summit of Ġordan Hill, girdled by an amber, jagged cliff face and slopes of blue clay, and topped by a lighthouse that now serves as a meteorological station. The panoramic views of the northwest's undulating landscape from the top of the hill are excellent, and well worth the journey up; you can also take a short walk along a path that loops around the hilltop.

Għarb

Bus #1, #2 and #91 from Rabat. Għarb is the most traditional and the sleepiest town in the Maltese islands, and has seen relatively little new development – though it has become something of a favourite place to own a second home, with many of its buildings now converted to suitably plush pads. The swimming pools and landscaped gardens haven't detracted from Għarb's rustic appeal, though, and it's a pleasant place to explore, with plenty of ornate townhouses fanning out from its attractive central square. Here, the Church of the Visitation (open daily for services only 6–8.30am & 5–7pm), completed in 1732 to a design modelled on the Sant Anjeze church in Rome, boasts an unusual and striking concave facade. The ornate low dome is framed by two bell towers, adorned with striking female statues that represent Faith (standing above the door), Hope (to the left) and Charity (to the right). Opposite the church, a restored eighteenth-century townhouse holds the Folklore Museum (☎21/561929; Mon–Sat 9am–4pm, Sun 9am–noon; Lm1.50). Spread over 28 rooms, the collection provides some interesting insight into life in Gozo. It centres on the tools,

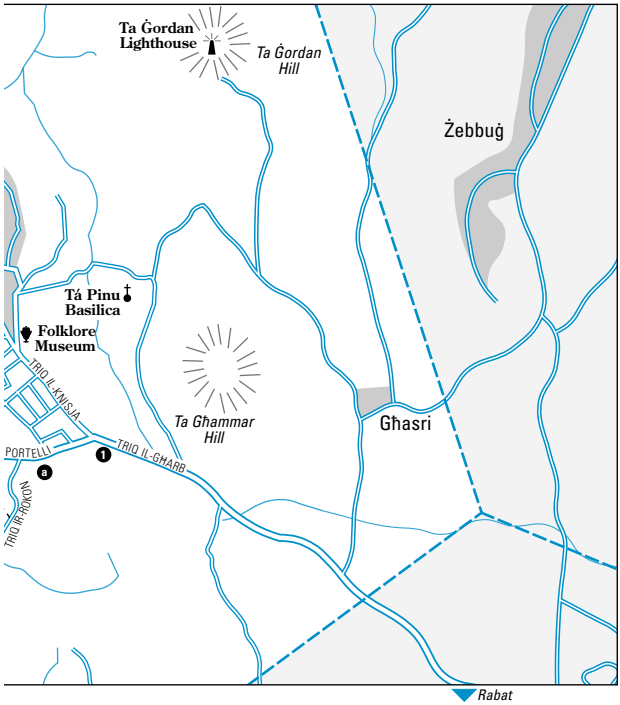
▲ GHARB TOWN SQUARE

machinery and manufacturing techniques of small-scale local industries that operated in Gozo before the advent of electricity and motor machinery in the early twentieth century, some of which are still in use today. Each room is dedicated to a different trade, and captions describe the exhibits and explain how they were employed.

▼ FOLKLORE MUSEUM, GHARB

San Dimitri Chapel

Reachable via a farmer's road beyond the northwest extremity of Gharb, about 3km from the town centre, this small, primitive chapel set in open countryside features in Malta's most famous legend. It was built in the mid-eighteenth century to commemorate a young Gozitan man said to have been snatched by Muslim corsairs. The story goes that his widowed mother Żgugina went to an earlier chapel built on this site to plead for Saint Dimitri to rescue her son; a painting of the saint then came alive, galloped across open sea on his horse and brought back the son. Thereafter Żgugina kept an oil lamp alight round the clock, and when an earthquake plunged



the land and chapel into the sea, the lamp remained flickering underwater. The chapel itself is a cuboid structure with a bare stone exterior weathered into a warm amber colour, and a pitched roof topped by an ornate belfry. Although it's rarely open, the chapel's large parapet makes a great spot for a picnic, with lovely views on all sides.

Dwejra

Bus #91 from Rabat, Mon–Fri only.

An undulating landscape shaped by geological rifts and characterized by bowl-shaped valleys, its coastline pockmarked with bays, Dwerja's distorted, crater-like topography has a bleak, alien attraction, and makes for some very scenic walking. Offshore, the underwater cliffs, valleys, ledges, massive plateaux and deep caves supporting soft coral offer what many consider the best scuba diving to be had in the Mediterranean (see p.165). The bus from Rabat drops you off near a car park and the Azure Window, a picturesque natural window in the cliffs, of almost 100m in height and width, that has been created by wave erosion. A few minutes' walk from here, along a side road that strikes off from the main access road, is the Inland Sea, a landlocked body of seawater connected to the Mediterranean via a tunnel in the towering cliff face. Southeast of the car park, another path takes you past Dwejra Tower, one of the coastal defence chain built by

▲ INLAND SEA

the Knights; beyond here is the horseshoe-shaped Dwejra Bay, whose shallow water is almost pitch black due to a thick blanket of seaweed that gets washed in by the northwesterly waves. Inland of here, the landscape is blighted by quarries. At the mouth of the bay, Fungus Rock (Il-Ġebla Tal-Ġeneral) soars seventy metres out of the sea into a stout pinnacle. The rock became renowned in the eighteenth century following the discovery of a parasitic plant growing here, which was thought to have wide-ranging medicinal and mythological powers. By 1746, the Knights had put the rock under 24-hour guard to preserve the plant for the privileged use of European royals and rulers (they believed that it grew only on this rock). Scientific analysis eventually discounted the alleged medicinal properties, but the rock remains out of bounds today to protect what's one of the world's rarest plants – phallus-shaped and covered in velvety brownish-red flowers, it grows abundantly here, but is extremely rare elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

Shops

Ta Dbieġi Crafts Village

Triq Frangisk Portelli, San Lawrenz. Daily: June–Sept 9.30am–6pm; Oct–May 9.30am–4.30pm. A cluster of workshops and shops producing and selling quality vernacular crafts such as candles, ceramics, pottery, lace, brassware and – arguably the main allure here – colourful blown glass. You can watch glass-blowing in the mornings.

Hotels

Kempinski San Lawrenz Resort

Triq Ir-Rokon, San Lawrenz ☎22/110000, ⓦwww.kempinski-gozo.com. Baroque-style building with coffered ceilings, loggia-framed balconies and plenty of paintings, surrounded by hills and agricultural land. The facilities are extensive (and include hammams and the only spa in Gozo), and the rooms are airy and comfortable, set on pastel colours. Doubles Lm90, breakfast included.

Restaurants

Jeffrey's

10 Triq L-Għarb, Għarb ☎21/557246. April–Oct Mon–Sat 6–10.30pm; Nov–Mar Thurs–Sat 6–10pm, Sun noon–3.30pm. Cooked up by one of Gozo's best chefs and served in a richly but tastefully decorated townhouse with an outdoor courtyard, the menu here is based around traditional dishes such as rabbit, *bragioli*, roast lamb, chicken baked in wine and vegetables as well as seafood and daily specials such as fish pancakes. About Lm5 for main courses.

Comino

Though it looks little more than a barren, sun-baked rock from the sea, tiny Comino (just 2km long by 1.7km wide) harbours a surprising variety of flora and fauna, as well as breathtaking clifftop scenery and two of the Maltese islands' most alluring beaches, which offer great snorkelling and diving. Throughout the summer, Comino sees its fair share of visitors and the beaches get pretty busy, but for the rest of the year, things are dead quiet. The ideal time to visit is in the spring, when the garigue blooms into a mosaic of flowers, but whatever the time of year, Comino is best seen via a gentle stroll along its single dirt road – it takes just two hours to walk around the entire island.

The Blue Lagoon

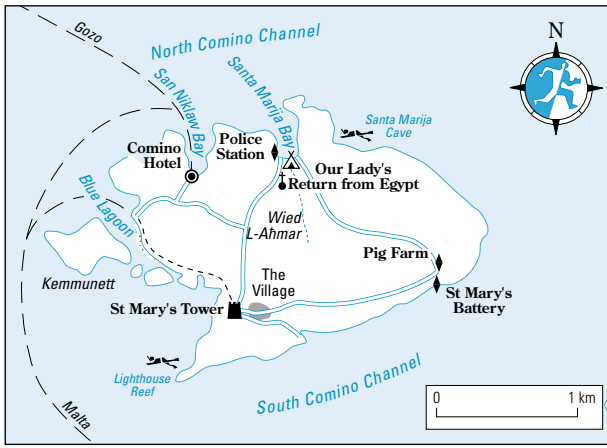
South of San Niklaw Bay, the first point of interest along the coastal dirt road is the Blue Lagoon, a fittingly evocative name for this sweep of turquoise water ringed by sandy beaches and sandwiched between Comino and its sister islet of Kemmunett. The water is so clear that it's like being in a pool, and you can enjoy the dramatic vista of the cliffs and Comino's tower as you swim between the islands. Quiet and private in the winter, the Blue Lagoon gets hideously overcrowded in summer, when boats packed with day-tripping bathers anchor in the bay from mid-morning until late afternoon.

St Mary's Tower

The sheer cliffs and variegated colours of the deep waters beyond the Blue Lagoon serve as a beautiful backdrop to St Mary's Tower. Perched on the edge of the cliffs, it's the largest of the Knight's coastal towers, and was built in 1618 by Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt to serve as a base for the garrison of troops stationed on Comino to protect the island from invasion and to guard the Malta–Gozo channel, a role it continued to serve until the 1990s. It's now in the care of a historical charity, and there's no public access, but the cliff edge in front of the tower affords a peaceful and lonely view over the water. Crevices in the cliffs

Visiting Comino

Between April and October, the Comino Hotel's boat shuttles guests between Ċirkewwa in Malta, and Mġarr Harbour in Gozo, to the landing in San Niklaw Bay, and will take non-guests for Lm3.50 return. It makes a couple of round-trips daily between sunrise and sunset – timings change every year, so call ☎21/529821 for the latest schedule. Midas Shuttle (☎99474142) also operate daily boats from Ċirkewwa to the Blue Lagoon, leaving on the hour from 9am–5pm, and also costing Lm3.50 return. However, services are suspended in bad weather, and are liable to be reduced if demand is low.



hereabouts are home to Malta's national bird, the blue rock thrush; you might see the dark blue males or brownish-grey females perched on outcrops performing their characteristic tail-flicks.

The Village

A horseshoe-shaped two-storey building, with loggias overlooking a courtyard and limestone walls being slowly eroded by the sea-spray, the Village was built in 1912. It served as an isolation hospital for plague and cholera victims before becoming the living quarters of a community of 65 people who grew export crops on Comino until the venture hit hard times in the early 1960s. The island's four current inhabitants are the only ones who remained behind, and they now occupy a small part of the building.

St Mary's Battery and Wied L-Aħmar

Continuing east along the coastal road, you'll pass a rather shabby pig farm, established here to raise disease-free animals after foot-and-mouth disease decimated Malta's pig stocks in the 1980s. Behind this, at the edge of the cliffs, is St Mary's Battery. Built in 1714, it's the best-preserved of the dozens of batteries erected by the Knights in their drive to reinforce Malta's coastal defences. Like its counterparts, it's a semicircular gun platform overlooking the sea, and in its heyday eight cannons poked out of its battlements. Though the battery is currently closed to the public, you can still see into its interior by peering over the low sections of its parapet wall. The hump of land northeast of the pig farm is Comino's highest point, and the garigue habitat here supports a hugely diverse array of plants, including musty-scented wild thyme, rotund tree spurges that look like bonsai trees, as well as capers, which sport beautiful white and purple blooms in spring, and St John's wort with its pea-sized yellow flowers. The flora here is all the more impressive when you consider that it has only dry

▲ SANTA MARIJA BAY

pockets of soil atop the rock in which to grow – given their fragile hold and slow growth, avoid stepping on the plants. From here, you can continue towards Santa Marija Bay along the cliffs, or head towards it via the road that cuts inland from the pig farm. The road runs through Wied L-Ahmar, Comino's most fertile land, fringed by native carobs, olives, almonds and aleppo pines; in the spring, the uncultivated portions of the valley are covered with a carpet of bright yellow cape sorrel flowers.

Santa Marija bay

Wied L-Ahmar opens into Santa Marija Bay, where the rough road traverses the bay's small strip of sand. With inviting turquoise water, Santa Marija Bay is an ideal spot for a picnic or a day by the sea. There's some good snorkelling to be had among the rocks towards the outer reaches of the bay. On the other side of the headland that encloses the bay (and not accessible from land) is a popular dive site known as Santa Marija Cave, renowned for its silvery shoals of docile bream; all Gozo-based diving centres (see p.165) can organize excursions to the site.

Our Lady's Return from Egypt

On the southern flank of Santa Marija Bay is a cream-coloured outpost built by the Knights in 1743 and now housing Comino's police station. Some 50m behind this, an oleander-lined road leads to the diminutive thirteenth-century chapel of Our Lady's Return from Egypt (open for services on Sat at 6pm, and Sun at 6.30am). Shaded by cypresses and a palm tree, and with timber doors and windows

▲ OUR LADY'S RETURN FROM EGYPT CHAPEL

and three bells dangling inside stone hoops, the simplicity of its design, typical of medieval Malta's vernacular architecture, gives the building a striking presence. Continuing along the road beyond the chapel, turning right at the first crossroads and then right again brings you back to San Niklaw Bay.

Hotels

Comino Hotels and Bungalows
San Niklaw Bay ☎21/529821, ⓦwww.cominohotels.com. April–Oct only. The only accommodation on Comino, and perfect if you're looking for isolation.. The en-suite rooms are spacious, with a/c, TVs and balconies. Watersports facilities (including diving and windsurfing) are excellent, and there are ten tennis courts and a gym as well as restaurants and bars. The hotel also rents detached bungalows in Santa Marija Bay. Doubles Lm56, breakfast and dinner included.

Essentials

Arrival

International flights arrive at the Malta International Airport, around 8km south of Valletta. There's a taxi stand outside the arrivals terminal; approximate fares are Lm6 to Valletta, Lm8 to Sliema and St Julian's, Lm10 to Buġibba and Lm13 to Ċirkewwa; note that you should always negotiate the price in advance. Bus #8 runs from the stop just outside the arrivals terminal to the main bus station in Valletta (daily 6am–8pm, every 30min; Lm0.20).

Information and websites

Local and foreign-based offices of the Malta Tourism Authority (Ⓦ www.visitmalta.com) supply leaflets on sights and activities, as well as free (but somewhat inadequate) maps, and an annual calendar of events; staff can help with basic queries only, while local offices have lists of accommodation options. In some offices (such as at the airport), you can book through the office on the spot. Within Malta, there are tourist offices in the airport arrivals hall (daily 10am–10pm; ⓣ23/696073), on Freedom Square in Valletta (daily 9am–5.30pm; ⓣ21/237747), and in Gozo in Tiġrija Palazz, on Triq Ir-Repubblika, Rabat (Mon–Sat 9am–5pm, Sun 9am–12.30pm; ⓣ21/561419).

Overseas tourist offices

UK Unit C, Park House, 14 Northfields, London SW18 1DD ⓣ020/8877 6990, Ⓔoffice.uk@visitmalta.com.

Ireland Plunkett Communications, 46 St James's Place, Dublin 2 ⓣ1662 0335 Ⓔinfo@plunkettcommunications.com.

USA 65 Broadway Suite 823, New York, NY 10006 ⓣ212/430 3799, Ⓔoffice.us@visitmalta.com

Australia 403 George Street, Sydney NSW 2000 ⓣ02/9321 9154, Ⓔoffice.au@visitmalta.com.

Websites

The best general online resource is the Malta Tourism Authority's website (Ⓦ www.visitmalta.com), which provides a glossy overview of the islands, and useful practical information on transport and accommodation, as well as a calendar of events. Otherwise, Search Malta (Ⓦ www.searchmalta.com) and About Malta (Ⓦ www.aboutmalta.com) have daily news, weather forecasts, special features and directories of Malta-related sites on everything from the economy to the environment; they also have accommodation listings. Gozo is covered more extensively in Gozo.com (Ⓦ www.gozo.com), which has information on sights, boat trips and town feasts, as well as the bus schedule, and listings of self-catering apartments and villas for rent.

Transport

Buses

With an extensive and inexpensive network of buses, it's relatively easy (if rather slow) to explore Malta via public transport; there are fewer services on Gozo, but the main tourist destinations and towns are all covered. Malta's buses are generally creaky post-war vehicles which can be slow, uncomfortable and stuffy. Virtually all services originate from and return to the main Valletta bus terminus (see p.51), and there are two other small bus stations in Sliema (see p.74) and Buġibba (see p.104) that offer direct services to heavily touristed places such as the Three Cities, Mdina and Rabat, Marsaxlokk, Ċirkewwa (for the Gozo ferry), and the beaches of Għajn Tuffieħa and Golden Bay. Services from the Valletta bus station start at 5.30am and stop between 9pm and 11pm, depending on the route (services to Paċeville run later; see p.74). Fares for services starting from and returning to Valletta are Lm0.20, while all direct services from Sliema and Buġibba cost Lm0.40, and night services from Paċeville cost Lm0.50; all fares are paid on board, and it's a good idea to have some small change. Bus passes covering unlimited travel are sold at the bus stations; they're valid for one, three, five or seven days and cost Lm1.50, Lm4, Lm4.50 and Lm5.50 respectively.

Although buses are numbered, destinations along the route are not listed, so ascertaining if a route serves the place you want to go to can be difficult, and bus stops are not marked with the name of their location (however drivers are normally happy to tell you where to get off). Bus schedules and maps of bus routes are available from tourist offices and the bus stations, and at ⓦ www.atp.com.mt. For more information on Malta's buses, contact the Public Transport Association on ⓣ 21/250007 ⓣ21/250008, or ⓣ21/250009.

For information on public transport in Gozo, see p.133.

Car and motorbike rental

Renting a car is of course more convenient than relying on buses, but it is relatively expensive, while signage is hit and miss, roads are rather poor, and local driving habits pretty chaotic. Nonetheless, a car can be cheaper than taking taxis if you plan to go out at night a lot, particularly if you're staying in northwest Malta, which is a fair way from the nightlife at Paċeville. To rent a car or a motorbike, most nationals (including all EU nationals) have to present a valid driving licence, and must be over 21. You may also need to show your passport, and some firms ask for a cash deposit or credit card imprint. An optional extra Lm2 or Lm3 daily for comprehensive insurance cover is worth considering given Malta's high accident rates; otherwise, damage to the vehicle can incur the insurance excess of Lm150. Average rates for a two-door, four-seater car are about Lm10 a day, and are usually discounted if you rent for longer than five days. Before renting, it's worth checking with your airline to see if they offer discounts on car rental. Reputable companies are listed below; most can arrange for cars to be picked up and left at the airport.

Given the short distances and clement weather, renting a motorbike can be a good option, and is cheaper than a car: rates start at around Lm6 per day. The downside is the slippery, potholed roads, and poor driving.

Car rental companies

Budget Mexico Buildings, Triq Żimelli, Marsa ⓣ21/231077, ⓦ www.budget.com.mt.

Hertz United House, 66 Triq Il-Gżira, Gżira ⓣ21/314636; airport office ⓣ21/232811, ⓦ www.hertzlease.com.mt.

Europcar Alpine House, Triq In-Naxxar, San Ġwann ⓣ21/388516, ⓦ www.europcar.com.

Swansea 102 Triq Manoel De Vilhena, Gżira ☎21/313261, 🌐www.malta-car-hire.com.

Rabat Garage 5 Triq Il-Kbira, Dingli ☎21/453975, 🌐www.rabatgarage.com.mt.

Gozo Car Hire 7B Triq L-Imġarr, Xewkija, Gozo ☎21/559585, 🌐www.gozo-carhire.com.

Motorbike rental companies

Albert's 200 Triq San Albert, Gżira ☎ & 📠21/340149.

Lillywhites Triq San Ġorġ, St Julian's ☎ & 📠21/375921.

Islander Tourist Services Triq It-Turisti, Buġibba ☎21/576039, 📠21/585821.

Victor Sultana Triq Putirjal, Rabat, Gozo ☎21/556414, 📠21/558067.

Taxis

Official taxis are white and have their registration number painted on the side of the car. There are plenty strategically located on taxi stands in the central areas, airports and ports, and along the nightlife and tourist circuits. Though taxis have meters, they're rarely used, and fares are fairly arbitrary – in most cases, drivers will try to squeeze as much money out of you as possible, and it's acceptable to haggle forcefully. Fares are not cheap: expect to pay at least Lm5 from Valletta to Sliema. After the buses have stopped after 11pm at night, prices generally go up by about a third. Several companies offer a 24-hour service; good options include Wembley's in St Julian's (☎21/374141 or ☎21/374242); Swansea in Sliema (☎21/313261 or ☎99475090); Rabat Garage in Malta's Rabat (☎21/453975 or ☎99471921); and Gozo Car Hire in Xewkija, Gozo (☎21/559585 or ☎99491001). Haggling won't work with these operators; check the fare when you call to avoid arguments later on.

Cycling

Although distances are short, there are various disadvantages to cycling in Malta. The topography – especially in Gozo – is hilly, and the summer heat can be exhausting. Additionally, you'll also have to contend with congested roads and haphazard Maltese driving habits. Having said this, bicycles can be a pleasant way of exploring Malta's rural areas. You can rent bikes for about Lm2 per day from the motorbike rental companies listed above.

Costs, money and banks

Although it is possible to get by on a tight budget, Malta can't be described as cheap, and the cost of living is escalating rapidly. Supermarket prices reach EU averages, and in restaurants, expect to pay an average of Lm8 for a two-course meal excluding drinks; alcoholic drinks, however, are cheaper than in most European countries. Public transport and entry fees for sights and museums are relatively inexpensive. Accommodation will gobble up the bulk of your budget – at the cheapest level, a hostel bunk costs Lm3 daily, while guesthouses cost about Lm16 for a double room per night. Lm30 will get you an en-suite double hotel room with a/c, phone and TV. The prices quoted in this guide are the starting rates in the peak summer months; these fall rapidly in the low season.

Currency

Malta's currency is the lira (Lm); when speaking English, Maltese people refer to the lira as the pound. A lira is divided into 100 cents; notes come in Lm2, Lm5, Lm10 and Lm20 denominations, and there are 1c, 2c, 5c, 10c, 25c, 50c and Lm1 coins.

Banks and exchange

Malta's banks have variable hours, but most open between Monday and Saturday in the morning, and in afternoons on one or two days weekly. Branches are numerous; in built-up areas, you'll never be more than ten-minutes' walk from the nearest bank. All branches have ATMs from which you can withdraw Maltese currency with a credit card or a debit card that's part of the Cirrus and Maestro international networks. It's possible to exchange foreign currency notes – particularly British sterling, US dollars and euros – in banks, exchange bureaux, 24-hour exchange machines in the main towns, and most hotels; all these places will also cash travellers' cheques, though you'll need to present your passport. Banks offer the best rates for cash or travellers' cheques; exchange bureaux normally charge a higher commission of about three percent, though their opening hours tend to be more convenient, while hotels charge a similar commission and round off the exchange rate to their advantage. The major credit cards – Visa, Mastercard, American Express, Diners – are widely accepted by shops, restaurants, hotels and guesthouses and car rental companies.

Post, phones and email

There are plenty of telephone booths scattered throughout Malta, but most take phonecards only (in denominations of Lm2, Lm3 or Lm5) that can be bought from stationers and souvenir shops. They are useful for national calls, especially since hotels usually impose substantial surcharges. For international calls, you can save a lot of money by using prepaid calling cards sold in most shops; there are several brands, all offering similar pricing structures, but do read the small print as some of them have expiry dates from first use. The code for incoming international calls to Malta from the United Kingdom, North America, Australia and New Zealand is 00356.

Post offices are located in virtually every town in the islands; most open Monday to Saturday from 8am to noon, but the two main offices – in Valletta and Rabat, Gozo – stay open until 4pm. Roughly speaking, mail to the UK takes three days to a week, ten days to two weeks to North America, and up to three weeks for Australia and New Zealand.

Internet cafés are plentiful in Malta's urban centres and tourist areas; you'll pay around Lm1 for an hour's connection.

Festivals and events

The highlight of the Maltese festival calendar is the effervescent summer *festas* that commemorate each town's patron saint. Most newer non-Catholic festivals are organized by the Malta Tourism Authority as an added allure to visitors. You can find info on all festivals and events in the yearly calendar of events available from the tourist offices, or online at ⓦ www.visitmalta.com. The MTA also publishes more details of the festivals in ⓦ www.maltafestivals.com.

Catholic town feasts

The 82 Catholic feasts organised annually by each town to commemorate its parish saint are unmissable if you're in Malta between June and September. For most Maltese, their town's *festa* is the cultural event of the year, a three-day affair of brass band concerts, fireworks and general merriment alongside adulation of the local patron saint. Everyone dresses in their best clothes, the streets are decorated with colourful lights, pennants, statues and tapestries, while church interiors are decked out with damask, silverware and crystal chandeliers. Probably copied from Sicilian traditions, the feasts originated in the late seventeenth century as modest celebrations involving bonfires, firecrackers, music, Catholic ritual and Mass. They evolved into their present form during the nineteenth century, when parishioners invested more money and energy and developed their pyrotechnic displays into a professional industry, and continue to increase in popularity – donations for the feasts swell year after year. Each parish mobilizes a huge effort to organize its annual feast. Funds come from door-to-door donations (the average household donates at least

The best feasts

For fireworks

The two-hour show in Lija (see p.100), on the eve of the feast every August 5, is an artistic and logistical feat. Mqabba also mounts an exceptional show on August 14.

For church interiors

Head for St Lawrence in Vittoriosa (see p.69) on August 8, or St Mary's in Xaghra (see p.143) on September 8.

For tradition

On June 28 between sunset and sunrise, thousands enjoy a traditional rabbit meal and take in live folk music at Il-Buskett in Rabat (see p.96).

For rivalry

Hamrun, which celebrates its feast on the first weekend after August 7, sees two rival brass band clubs march through the streets, respectively dressed in blue and red, hollering slogans at each other and hurling paint at the facades of the rival club. Two feasts in Gozo's Rabat (San Ġorġ in mid-July and Santa Marija on August 15; see p.133) feature similar scenes, when activists beat and burn effigies of the rival band club.

For Catholic adulation

On August 15, at Gozo's Citadel (see p.122), thousands of devotees hail the Madonna with feverishly rapt singing as the statue reaches the church at around 10pm.

Lm10 annually), and all the preparation is carried out by volunteers. This makes the feasts a collective endeavour of each town, a yearly ritual that serves as a reaffirmation of the centrality of the Catholic Church in community affairs. Evoking passion, pomp, pride, romance and a sense of belonging under the fusion of common values, the pathos of the feasts generates community spirit, but also brings out the rivalry inherent in Maltese society – each town competes to create the most spectacular event, while there's also intense rivalry between different band clubs within the same town. The most visible aspect of the feasts is the fabulous fireworks displays that round off each town's event. Some 800 volunteer pyrotechnists dedicate their spare time all year round to make the fireworks (the combined value of the fireworks that they produce is Lm5 million, equal to the revenue generated by the agricultural industry), and the displays put on here are arguably the best in the world.

Although feast-related activities (community games, barbecues and so on) begin about two weeks before the actual date of the feast, the full-scale celebrations only take place in the last three days, generally Friday to Sunday, when the town square fills up with people, stalls sell refreshments, and the bars stock up. On the Friday and Saturday evenings, a brass band plays in the town square, while a second band leads a procession headed by the statue of the patron saint, and fireworks explode through the skies. On the main day of the feast, celebrations start with a morning High Mass, followed at noon by a brass-band march when inebriated young people dance wildly and sing the thematic slogans of their parish. Some towns also organize horse races in the afternoon (normally 2–5pm). By 7pm, the brass band heralds the final round of celebrations in the town square by playing more adulatory tunes as another statue of the parish saint comes out of the church. More fireworks are then followed by a final procession with the statue. Throughout, the skies are ablaze with fireworks, which reach a colourful finale as the statue reaches the church. A final brass band march marks the close of the feast.

Carnival

Staged in Valletta and Floriana during the week preceding Lent, the carnival parades organized by the Department of Culture feature large colourful, floats and professional dance troupes. Nadur in Gozo sees more interesting pre-Lenten celebrations which are closer to the mock-revolutionary origins of carnival, in which the underclasses romped through the streets in an unruly event. Although the modern era is closing in (you'll see lots of latex Halloween-style masks), the spontaneous street theatre here is still driven by the original spirit, and many of the costumes are highly creative, deliberately farcical parodies of the powers-that-be.

Holy Week

Each Good Friday, many Maltese towns stage sober biblical re-enactments. Starting at dusk, these impressive parades feature Biblical characters and statues representing the Stations of the Cross. Dressed in white robes and hoods, participants follow the procession dragging bundles of metal chains or wooden crosses in penitence and holy self-mortification. Two of the best re-enactments are held in Xagħra and Żejtun. On Easter Sunday towns all over Malta erupt in celebrations, including sprinting with the statue of the Risen Christ to symbolize Christ's Resurrection – the most raucous event is held in Vittoriosa after morning Mass at around 10am.

Malta Jazz Festival

The Malta Jazz Festival is held in the third weekend of July at an open-air venue underneath the Valletta fortifications. The three-day event features top musicians drawn from a Maltese and international list – past performers include Chick Corea, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Al Di

Meola and Mike Stern. A block ticket costs Lm15; one-night tickets are Lm7. Tickets are available on the door, or can be bought in advance in selected shops. You can get more information from the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (☎ 21/232515, 🌐 www.maltajazzfest.com).

Historic Cities festival

Ten days of historical pageantry, historical re-enactments, concerts, military shows, theatre, tours and food organized by the Malta Tourism Authority in Valletta, Vittoriosa, Mdina and Rabat (Gozo). Highlights include re-enactments of historic events such as the uprising against the French, and colourful parades by costumed Knights, as well as a Military Tattoo that features bands drawn from Malta and various European countries.

Fireworks Festival

Staged in the Grand Harbour over a weekend in May, this is an opportunity for top Maltese pyrotechnists to show their talents – you're guaranteed to see one of the best fireworks shows in the world. Each show lasts about two hours, with colourful fireworks being launched simultaneously from barges placed across the width of the Grand Harbour. You'll get good views from any point along the eastern flank of Valletta.

Sports and outdoor activities

Scuba diving and watersports

Watersports outfits operate on many of the islands' main beaches between May to October, and offer anything from parasailing, waterskiing, wake-boarding or jet-skiing to canoes and kayaks for rent; many also have speedboats for rent.

Malta's waters offer some of the best scuba diving in the Mediterranean, and attract some 50,000 enthusiasts annually. Aside from stunning seascapes (from boulder meadows, gulleys, chimneys and ledges to sheer cliff-drops) and rich marine life, underwater visibility is excellent here – 20m in spring and autumn during plankton build-up, and up to 45m between November and March – while the mild weather allows year-round diving (water temperatures rise to a peak average of 27ºC in summer, and go down to an average of 15ºC in winter). Of the three islands, Gozo offers the most spectacular dive sites, especially off Dwejra at the western tip – but the basic rule of thumb is that the further north you go, the better the diving. There's no space in this guide to detail all the islands' diving sites, but Lawson and Leslie Wood's *Dive Sites of Malta, Comino and Gozo* contains detailed information (it's available at Sapienza's Bookshop in Valletta; see p.62).

The thirty-plus diving centres in the islands are professional outfits affiliated with the major international schools (PADI, CMAS and BSAC etc), and offer all the standard courses plus specialized programmes such as night- or cave-diving, as well as renting out equipment. Five-day open water courses cost about Lm130, and three-day advanced open water courses around Lm80. Most schools also offer taster dives for the uninitiated – instructors take you down to a depth of 10m without the need of prior instruction (around Lm15). Some diving schools have provisions for divers with disabili-

ties – for an updated list of schools that facilitate diving for the disabled, contact the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, Triq Il-Kbira San Ġuzepp, Santa Venera (☎21/487789).

Diving centres

Malta

Dive Systems Tower Point, Tower Road, Sliema ☎21/342040, ⓦ www.divesystemsmalta.com.

Maltaqua Mosta Rd, St Paul's Bay ☎21/571873, ⓦ www.maltaqua.com.

Sub-Way Triq Il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri, Buġibba ☎21/580611, ⓦ www.subwayscuba.com.

Gozo

Calypso Aquatic Sports Club Triq Marina, Marsalforn ☎21/561757, ⓦ www.calypsodivers.com.

Gozo Aqua Sports Rabat Rd, Marsalforn ☎21/563037, ⓦ www.gozoaquasports.com.

Moby Dives Triq Il-Gostra, Xlendi ☎21/551616, ⓦ www.mobydivesgozo.com.

Snorkelling

The best underwater scenery and the largest concentration of marine life are found in the nooks and crannies along the islands' rocky shores. As well as colourful growths, underwater rocks harbour clusters of spiny sea urchins, inquisitive common octopus and beautiful red starfish. Finger-sized fishes such as blennies, grey triggerfish and connemara suckerfish float in shallow waters, darting away as you get close to explore their variegated colours. Large, silvery shoals of fish are also commonly seen close to the shoreline – these include bream, mullet, silverfish, sand smelt, chromis and wrasse.

Yacht charters

The Maltese islands' coastline – especially the sheer cliffs of southwest Gozo – is far more beautiful from the sea than from any terrestrial perspective, and chartering a yacht allows some fabulous views as well as access to many coves and creeks that are only reachable from the sea. Prices vary depending on level of service and type of boat – generally speaking, you're unlikely to find anything for less than Lm100 daily from reputable companies such as the ones listed below. Best deals are often had from freelance operators – just visit the yacht marinas and ask around, especially in Gozo, where there are few formalities. You can also go to an established company; two of the most reliable, both in Malta, are S & D Yachts Ltd, Sea Breeze, Giuseppe Cali St, Ta Xbiex (☎21/339908, ⓦ www.sdyachts.com), and Sundream Marine, 527 St Paul's St, St Paul's Bay (☎21/573278, ⓦ www.digigate.net/sundream). For sailing advice and contacts, try the Royal Malta Yacht Club at Couvre Port, Manoel Island, Gżira (☎21/333109, ⓦ www.rmyc.org).

Hiking

The network of paths that crisscross the Maltese countryside offer ample opportunity for hiking. The best time for a walk is winter (Oct–May), when the weather is mild and the landscape green – in summer, you'll find that only early morning or evening walking is comfortable; in any case, the parched countryside isn't that appealing. Bear in mind, also, that during autumn and spring (and particularly in April and May), bird hunters and trappers can be a problem; besides shattering the peace with shotgun blasts, hunters can get tetchy with strollers, largely because they are aware of the offensiveness that their indiscriminate shooting causes among non-hunters. If you encounter a hunter, the most prudent thing to do is to greet them nicely and keep going; although incidents are rare, hunters do not like "foreigners" to dictate what they shouldn't be doing.

We've detailed some short, scenic walks in the guide, but for longer hikes, head to Malta's south coast between Dingli Cliffs and Ras Il-Qammieġħ,

or to Gozo's coastal cliffs between Mġarr Ix-Xini and Xlendi, Xlendi and Ras Il-Wardija and San Blas Bay and Marsalforn. You can also join one of the hiking tours organized by Malta Outdoors (Mirob, Triq Il-Ħġejjeġ, Buġibba mobile ⓣ 99925439, ⓦ www.maltaoutdoors.com), which include a four-day trek around Gozo's coast.

Birdwatching

Though Maltese birdlife is constantly threatened by hunters, the islands nonetheless offer fairly good birdwatching, particularly in spring, when Eurasian migratory birds crossing the Mediterranean stop off here. Around 320 species (including some thirteen resident species) have been recorded in Malta. Spectacular birds of prey, mainly harriers and honey buzzards, pass through in September and October; the best place to see them is Il-Buskett (where they roost. For waterbirds, visit the Simar (see p.107) and Għadira (see p.115) wetland reserves. For more information on birdwatching, or to join local birdwatchers, contact Birdlife Malta at 57/28 Marina Court, Abate Rigard St, Ta' Xbiex, MSD 12 (ⓣ 21/347646; ⓦ www.birdlifemalta.org).

Rock climbing

The Maltese islands offer exciting climbing at all levels of challenge, with cliffs (many unchartered) girdling virtually the entire northwest and southwest coasts of the Maltese islands, and numerous stretches of inland cliffs. Malta's most experienced climber Andrew Warrington (ⓣ 21/372396 or mobile ⓣ 99470377, ⓦ www.climbmalta.com) takes people climbing every weekend on a freelance basis.

Horse riding

Malta's dramatic northwest coastline around Għajn Tuffieħa and Golden Bay is lovely to explore on horseback; head for Golden Bay Horse Riding (no phone; daily 8am–6pm, Lm6 per hour, or Lm10 for two hours) situated in the immediate hinterland of Golden Bay.

Other sports

Marsa Sports Club (MSC) in Marsa (daily 8.30am–8.30pm; ⓣ 21/233851, ⓦ www.marsasportsclub.com) has seventeen all-weather tennis courts that you can rent for Lm1.80 per hour (Lm2.80 after 7pm), as well as squash courts (Lm0.40 per 45min). The MSC is also home to Malta's only golf course (ⓣ 21/227019, ⓦ www.maltagolf.org), an 18-hole par-68 course; clubs can be hired for Lm5 each daily, and a round costs Lm18. The MSC is also the best place to watch spectator sports such as polo, cricket and archery; call in advance to see what's on.

Cinemas, theatres and casinos

Cinemas

All mainstream cinemas have modern theatres and generally feature Hollywood releases. Tickets cost between Lm1.85 and Lm2.85, and most offer discounts on quiet days, Mondays particularly. Art-house films are aired nightly at St James Cavalier (see p.52), and every Tuesday evening at *Misfits* bar in Paċeville for free (see p.84).

Mainstream Cinemas

Embassy Triq Santa Lucia, Valletta ⓣ21/227436, ⓦ www.embassycomplex.com.mt. Six screens.

Eden Century Cinemas Triq Santu Wistin, St George's Bay, St Julian's ⓣ21/376401, ⓦ www.edenleisure.com. Seventeen screens.

Eden Imax St George's Bay, St Julian's ⓣ21/341191, ⓦ www.imax.com.mt. Two screens.

Empire Cinema Complex Triq Il-Korp Tal-Pijunieri, Buġibba ⓣ21/581787. Seven screens.

Citadel Theatre Pjazza Indipendenza, Rabat, Gozo ⓣ21/559955, ⓦ www.citadelcinema.com. Two screens.

Theatre

There are four theatres in the Maltese islands: two in Valletta, and two in Rabat, Gozo; the theatre season runs between October and May. Check at tourist offices for details of upcoming events, or keep an eye out for posters, as well as listings in local newspapers. Offerings are fairly varied, from mainstream touring productions to plays by Maltese companies, whilst theatres are also used to stage classical music concerts, opera and ballet.

Theatres

Manoel Theatre Triq It-Teatru L-Antik, Valletta ⓣ21/246389, ⓦ www.teatrumanoel.com.mt. Built by the Knights in the eighteenth century, Malta's 600-seater National Theatre features drama and concerts.

Theatre in the Round St James Cavalier, Triq Papa Piju V, Valletta ⓣ21/223200, ⓦ www.sjcav.org. A small theatre with sixty seats arranged around the central stage. Productions range from classical concerts to experimental plays.

Aurora Opera Theatre Triq Ir-Repubblika, Rabat, Gozo ⓣ21/562974. A large theatre renowned for excellent operas; it also stages drama and other events such as ballet.

Astra Theatre 9 Triq Ir-Repubblika, Rabat, Gozo ⓣ21/556256 or ⓣ21/550985. The largest Baroque theatre in Malta features anything from operas to drama and ballet.

Casinos

To visit either of Malta's three casinos you'll have to show some sort of identification to prove you're over 18; dress code is smart casual. All casinos offer rows of slot machines, as well as table games such as blackjack, poker, punto banco, roulette and chemin de fer.

Casino di Venezia Ix-Xatt Tal-Birgu, Vittoriosa ⓣ21/805580. Daily 2pm–4am; gaming tables from 7pm. Malta's most sumptuous casino is housed in a beautiful building that was originally built as the headquarters of the Knights' naval fleet.

Dragonara *Westin Dragonara Hotel*, St Julian's ⓣ21/382362, ⓦ www.dragonara.com. Aug–Sept 24hr; Oct–Jul daily 10am–6am. A lovely setting in a nineteenth-century Neoclassical building.

Oracle Casino *New Dolmen Hotel*, Dolmen St, Buġibba ⓣ21/581510, ⓦ www.dolmen.com.mt. A large, modern in-hotel casino.

Directory

Electricity The supply is 240V, and plugs are three-pin.

Embassies and consulates UK High Commission, 7 Triq Sant' Anna, Floriana ⓣ23/230000; US Embassy, 3rd Floor, Development House, Triq Sant' Anna, Floriana ⓣ21/235960 or ⓣ21/235961; Canada Consulate, 103 Triq L-Arċisqof, Valletta ⓣ25/523232; Australia High Commission, Villa Fiorentina, Ta' Xbiex Terrace, Ta' Xbiex ⓣ21/338201.

Emergencies For police, ambulance and fire service, call ⓣ112; for helicopter rescue call ⓣ21/244371; for coastguard call ⓣ21/235711.

Hospitals St Luke's Hospital, Pjazza San Luqa, Msida ⓣ21/241251; Gozo General Hospital, Rabat, Gozo ⓣ21/561600.

Laundry There are a handful of strategically located laundries – some have coin-operated machines. Lion Launderette, 3 Triq It-Turisti, Buġibba (ⓣ21/580578) will pick up and drop off laundry to addresses in St Paul's Bay and Buġibba. Swan Laundry has several shops throughout the islands; in Malta, there's one on Tower Road in Sliema (ⓣ21/341896), and in Jane's Boutique, Triq Ġorġ Borġ Olivier, Rabat (ⓣ21/452573); in Gozo, it's at Bambina Boutique, 18 Triq Tmienja Ta Settembru, Xagħra (ⓣ21/551088).

Pharmacies The islands' many pharmacies open from Monday to Saturday 9am–7pm; daily newspapers list those that open, on a roster basis, in evenings, Sundays and public holidays until 10pm.

Public holidays Malta has fourteen public holidays: January 1, February 10, March 19, Good Friday, March 31, May 1, June 7, June 29, August 15, September 8, September 21, December 8, December 13 and December 25.

Time Malta is one hour ahead of GMT.

Travellers with disabilities Planning rules have only had to make provision for people with disabilities in the last decade, and facilities generally remain rather poor. However many upmarket hotels have rooms equipped for people with disabilities; to get a list of these properties, or for general information and contacts, get in touch with the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, Ċentru Ħidma Soċjali, Triq Il-Kbira San Ġuzepp, Santa Venera (mid-June to Sept 8.30am–1pm; Oct to mid-June Mon–Fri 8.30am–noon & 2–4.30pm ⓣ21/487789).

Language

Language

Malti ("Maltese" in English) has its roots in the Arabic of western North Africa, but has gathered many words and influences from Italian, English, French, German and Spanish; in fact, it's a mishmash of all these languages. Though a Semitic language, Maltese is written in a Roman script which evolved at the beginning of the twentieth century: Italian was Malta's default language up to 1934, when it was officially replaced by Maltese and English. Virtually everyone speaks good English, and many street signs, shop names, restaurant menus and so on are in English only. Most Maltese speak a hybridized form of Maltese-English in everyday discourse, and a sizeable minority speak English only. Given this situation, the locals don't expect you to attempt to speak Maltese. It's fine to stick to English, and just learn the basics of Maltese pronunciation in order to get to grips with place names.

The Maltese **alphabet** has twenty-nine letters – five vowels (as in English) and twenty-four consonants (some of which will be new): a, b, ċ, d, e, f, g, ġ, h, ħ, i, j, k, l, m, n, għ, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, ż, z. Pronunciation of most of the letters differs from English, in that emphasis is placed on a drawn-out twang. Instances of markedly unusual pronunciation are listed below.

Maltese pronunciation

ċ as **ch** in church
e as in bet
g is hard, as in **g**oat
ġ is soft, as in **j**oke
h is silent (except at the end of a word, when it's pronounced like ħ)
ħ is strong and definite, as in **h**ail
i as the English e in bee
j as in **y**es
għ is silent in most instances
q is a glottal stop – the sound in the beginning and middle of "uh-oh"
x is an English "sh", as in **sh**ear
ż is soft, as in **z**ebra
z as in ba**ts**

Glossary

auberge an inn of residence for a group of Knights forming a particular langue
baħar sea
bajja bay
bastion triangular outcrop jutting from a line of fortifications to produce a zigzag outline that provided a wide range of fire coverage, and reinforced structural resistance
bieb generic name for a door or doorway; also the gate to a fortified city
bragioli a traditional baked dish of steak with a mincemeat stuffing
cavalier tower within fortifications that acts a raised gun platform and rearguard position
corsair sea-based pirate licensed by the state to carry out piracy against a defined enemy
curtain the main trace of fortifications linking two bastions
dagħjsa boat

demi-bastion a small bastion with one flank
fat ladies generic term for well-endowed stone figures and statues from the Neolithic era
festa (plural **festi**) generally refers to the three-day summer festivals held to commemorate parish saints; also public holidays
fliegu sea channel
forn bakery
fortizza fort
garigue rugged stretches of rocky landscape with pockets of soil that support plant life
għar cave.
għassa tal-pulizija police station
għolja hill
globigerina local limestone used in many Maltese buildings
ġnien garden
Grand Master the absolute ruler of the Knights of Malta
gvern government
gzira island
hobża bread roll or loaf of bread
hut fish
il-belt city, usually applied to Valletta
ispiżerija pharmacy
karrozza car
kastell castle
kenur traditional stone hearth used for cooking
knisja church
kunsill lokali local council
langue a grouping of the Knights of Malta, defined by the region from which they originated
luzzu colourful vernacular wooden fishing boats
misrah square or clearing
mużew museum
parroċċa parish
passiġġatta a walk, particularly an evening stroll by the sea
pastizzi (singular **pastizz**) puff pastry pocket stuffed with mashed peas or ricotta
pjazza town square
posta post office
pulizija police
ravelin triangular defensive outbuilding in front of fortifications
RTO an abbreviation of Reserved To Owner, used by hunters to mark their territory
San or Sant' (female **Santa**) saint
sies or irdum cliff
sqaq alley
tabib doctor
tal-linja bus
tempju shrine, usually in reference to a Neolithic temple
torri tower
triq street or road
vapur ship
wied valley

small print & Index

A Rough Guide to Rough Guides

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Help us update

We've gone to a lot of effort to ensure that the first edition of **Malta DIRECTIONS** is accurate and up to date. However, things change – places get "discovered", opening hours are notoriously fickle, restaurants and rooms raise prices or lower standards. If you feel we've got it wrong or left something out, we'd like to know, and if you can remember the address, the price, the phone number, so much the better.

We'll credit all contributions, and send a copy of the next edition (or any other DIRECTIONS guide or Rough Guide if you prefer) for the best letters. Everyone who writes to us and isn't already a subscriber will receive a copy of our full-colour thrice-yearly newsletter. Please mark letters: "**Malta DIRECTIONS Update**" and send to: Rough Guides, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, or Rough Guides, 4th Floor, 345 Hudson St, New York, NY 10014. Or send an email to **mail@roughguides.com**

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MALTA
Comino
Gozo
Gozo Channel
Ġnejna Bay
Armier Bay
Ramla Bay
Paradise Bay
L-Aħrax tal-Mellieħa
Ras il-Qammieħ
Marfa Ridge
Mellieħa Bay
St Paul's Islands
Mellieħa
Mellieħa Ridge
Mistra Bay
Bajda Ridge
St Paul's Bay
Wardija Ridge
Golden Bay
Ġnejna Bay
Fomm ir-Riħ Bay
Msarr
Il-Kunċizzjoni
Mtarfa
Rabat
Mdina
Dingli
Ġar Lapsi
Dingli Cliffs
Mosta
Naxxar
Lija
Balzan
Attard
Qrendi
Wied iċ-Ċurrieq
Qrendi
Blue Grotto
Mqabba
Siġġiewi
Dafħebbuġ
Luqa
Marsa
Paola
Cospicua
Vittoriosa
Senglea
Floriana
Valletta
Msida
Yacht Marina
Ta' Xbiex
Gżira
Manoel Island
Sliema
St Julian's
Paceville
Marsamxett Harbour
Grand Harbour
Tarxien
Fgura
Marsascala
Marsaxlokk
Marsaxlokk Bay
Birżebbuġa
Delimara
Xrobb l-Għaġin
Peter's Pool
Long Bay
Bajar Iċ-Ċagħaq
Salina Bay
Busibba
Italy & North Africa
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Metres
250
200
150
100
50
0
Built up area
N
0
10 km
Gozo
see map
Comino
Malta
0
3 km

GOZO
0
2 km
Metres
150
100
50
0
Built up area
Wied Il-Ġiasri
Salt Pans
Xwejni
Qbajjar
Marsalforn Bay
Ġ ajn Qawqla
Ġ ajn Barrani
Ramla Bay
San Blas Bay
Dġ let Qorrot
Febbus
Marsalforn
Għarb
Għasri
San Lawrenz
Dwejra
Inland Sea
Azure Window
Fungus Rock
Xagħra
Marsalforn Valley
Ramla Valley
Keraem
Rabat
Ras Il-Wardija
Nadur
Qala
Xlendi Valley
Xlendi
Munxar
Xewkija
Ras Il-Bajda
Wied Ġ anira
Ħaġ ar Qim
Mnarr Harbour
Ħebla Tal-Ġ alfa
Ġ ondoq Ir-Rummien
Sannat
Ta ċ enċ Cliffs
Mġ arr Ix-Xini
San Niklaw Bay
Santa Marija Bay
Blue Lagoon
Kemmunett
Comino
Gozo Channel
N
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Sicily (Italy)
Siracusa
Sicilian Channel
Tunis
Pantelleria (Italy)
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Linosa
Isole Pelagie (Italy)
Lampedusa
TUNISIA
Gozo
Rabat
Malta
Valletta
0
50km
0
10 km
Gozo
Comino
Malta
see map
Airkewwa
Malta

Useful stuff

Tourist offices In the airport arrivals hall (daily 10am–10pm; ⓣ23696073); on Freedom Square in Valletta (daily 9am–5.30pm; ⓣ21/237747); and in Gozo in Tiġrija Palazz, on Triq Ir-Repubblika, Rabat (Mon–Sat 9am–5pm, Sun 9am–12.30pm; ⓣ21/561419).

Currency Malta's currency is the lira (Lm); when speaking English, Maltese people refer to the lira as the pound. A lira is divided into 100 cents; notes come in Lm2, Lm5, Lm10 and Lm20 denominations, and there are 1c, 2c, 5c, 10c, 25c, 50c and Lm1 coins.

Post offices There is one in virtually every town on the islands; most are open Monday to Saturday from 8am to noon, but the two main offices in Valletta and Rabat stay open until 4pm.

Festivals The yearly calendar of events is available from tourist offices, or online at ⓦwww.visitmalta.com and ⓦwww.maltafestivals.com.

Public holidays January 1, February 10, March 19, Good Friday, March 31, May 1, June 7, June 29, August 15, September 8, September 21, December 8, December 13 and December 25.

Electricity The supply is 240V, and plugs are three-pin.

Emergencies For police, ambulance and fire service, call ⓣ112; for helicopter rescue call ⓣ21/244371; for coastguard call ⓣ21/235711.

Time Malta is one hour ahead of GMT.

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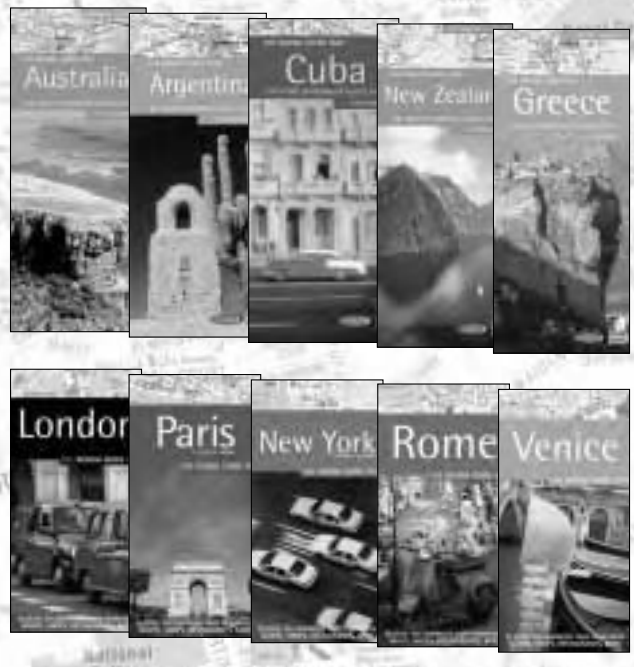

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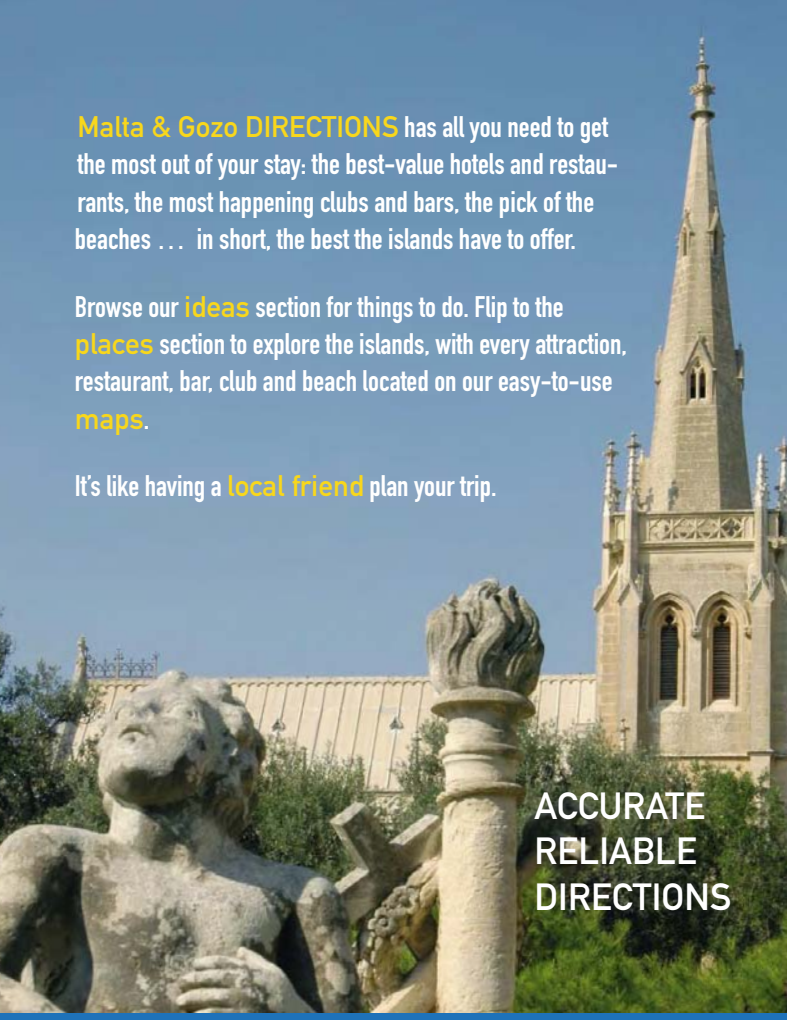

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